

The Jesus Verses of the Qur'an

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Preface on personal and professional readings of the Qur'an

It may be useful for the reader of this book to have some insight into the biography of the author and also into the general structure of the Qur'an. Although the author is working in an academic occupation, this does not exclude the possibility that personal favouritism has influenced his work. It would be naïve to suppose some non-existing objectivity. Secondly, the Jesus verses are part of the Qur'an and therefore some necessary information about this scripture has been given in this preface as well.

As to experiences of reading the Qur'an, my first memory is that of Arabic classes with the late Jesuit Professor Jean Houben of the Catholic University of Nijmegen. Houben was a staunch orthodox Catholic who in the late 1960s had many problems with the renewal of Vatican II and the general beginning of democratisation and 'flower power culture' in European universities. He had a great dream for a common future of Christianity and Islam. If all Christians would return to the sound doctrines of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and all Muslims stick to the writings of the Muslim theologian and philosopher Ibn Rushd or Averroes (1126-1198), a reconciliation between the two largest religions of the world would be a real possibility. As to the Qur'an, Houben admired the beauty of its language and liked to recite its text slowly with the trained voice of the older generation of priests who could fill a church without loudspeakers. His favourite text was the story of the Patriarch Joseph in Egypt. He never elaborated on Jesus in Muslim thought, because he saw a bridge only in the use of Aristotelian philosophy by Aquinas, a follower of Averroes. The most fundamental topics for Christians to study in Islam were the concepts of God and human free will. These were more expressed in philosophical than in Qur'anic discourse.

After obtaining my *doctorandus* degree (the equivalent of an MA), I went to Indonesia for field work in *pesantren*,

Islamic boarding schools where boys (and sometimes also girls) between the age of 10-24 were trained in Qur'an recitation, Islamic sciences and also some secular knowledge. After visiting many schools, I decided to spend the last three months of my field research in one prominent and modern *pesantren*, *Darus Salam* in Gontor, East Java. During my first period I had already stayed during one week in that renowned school, where some 1200 student at high school and college level followed a mixed programme of religious and secular knowledge. Many graduates later became mosque leaders and teachers of religion in schools, but many also entered the business world or took up positions like village head. Upon my arrival I had a long discussion with the Director, Imam Zarkasji, about the classes that would be fit for me, but also about practical things like a room to stay, and how to get food. Finally I expressed my wish to join the community of this school also in the daily prayers. I stated that I had grown up a Catholic and that I saw no reason to leave that community. But I saw no problems in participating in the Muslim ritual prayer. During my research I had often joined people in the mosque for the *salat*, the ritual prayer said five times a day. I had started to like the sound of the Qur'an recitation. I had learned a number of the most popular verses by heart. As a Catholic I was trained in praying in a fast way, as is the habit in praying the rosary. The same is done with the first chapter or *sura* of the Qur'an that is recited several times during all prayers. It has seven lines, like the Lord's Prayer, and the same structure: after a praise of God, human need and their lower status is expressed, ending in a plea for help:

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Caring
Praise be to God, Lord sustainer of the worlds,
The Compassionate the Caring,
Master of the day of reckoning.
To you we worship
 and to you we turn in time of need.
Guide us along the road that is straight,
 the road of those to whom you are giving your grace
 not those with anger upon them
 not those who have lost the way.

We discussed the meaning of this text and agreed that a Christian could use this text of the Qur'an for prayer as well as a Muslim. Then they showed me chapter 112 from the Qur'an and I was asked to read it in Arabic, to translate it into Indonesian, and to comment upon it. In English translation this text reads:

Say, He is God, one.

God, forever

Gives not birth, is not born

There is none like Him, not one.

In the discussion I emphasised that the first line here has the same meaning as the beginning of the Nicean creed: I believe in One God. The third line is debated: according to most western scholars of Islam it was originally not directed against Christians, but against Arab polytheists who revered a number of female deities taken as daughters of the High God. Against this belief the Qur'an with some wittiness argues: If God would have taken children, he certainly would have taken sons and not daughters (Qur'an 53:19-22). Also Christians do not believe in a biological process of the birth of Jesus from a supreme deity. Whatever we ascribe to God and Jesus, their relation is not that of biological father and son. Fatherhood and sonship should be seen as mere images and not as physical reality. Therefore, also this sura 112 is acceptable for Christians. Thereupon I was accepted as a member of the prayer-community, be it under strict condition that I would also perform the ritual ablutions. At the end of my period of participant observation in this boarding school the director asked my permission that he might pray that I would become a 'full Muslim'. I agreed. Anyway, Muslim has the meaning of someone who truly surrenders to God.

Between 1981-1988 I was a lecturer at the State Academy of Islamic Sciences in Indonesia, an institute located in the capital Jakarta and the beautiful city of Yogyakarta. I was appointed to teach the western tradition of the science of religion. The Indonesian government has a ministry of religion. Its minister wanted to send a good number of Muslim academics to western countries. The main reason was that in other academic fields like medicine, economics, architecture, social sciences, the best students were sent to western countries, but

for study of Islam many were sent to Muslim countries like Iran, Iraq, Arabia and Egypt. In order to educate scholars of religion who also could communicate with those who had studied in the west, it was deemed necessary that Indonesian students should also pursue at least a master's or doctoral degree in western countries. The Dutch and Canadian governments were most generous in providing fellowships for these students and in providing other facilities. My appointment was part of this program.

Already in the beginning of my work in Jakarta there was some upheaval. I taught, in line with some western scholars of Qur'anic Studies, that in the beginning of sura 17 what was mentioned was not the nightly ascension of Muhammad but the nightly journey of Moses from Egypt in freedom to the desert as the beginning of the return of the Jews to Canaan. The Muslim reading of sura 17:1 recognizes here Muhammad's nightly journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and his ascension from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. This reading could, according to my teaching, have been constructed after the Caliph Abdulmalik had in the early 690s declared Jerusalem to be the central place of pilgrimage for Muslims, temporarily replacing Mecca, which was at that time occupied by a rival ruler. My students were not really happy with this suggestion. They saw it as an attack on the historical truth about an important moment in Muhammad's life. Moreover, on the walls of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem a variant text of sura 19:31-3 is still found and I suggested that early Muslims had no problems with small variations in the text of the Qur'an. Besides, it could well be that early Islam was much closer to Christianity and had put Jesus in a much more central position than had later Islam. This could explain the prominent place of Jesus on the first great Muslim building in Jerusalem.

These historical possibilities caused quite a lot of rumour and started a debate on the use of the critical methodology for Qur'anic studies. Because of my position as representative for this western academic tradition I continued to give commentaries in this way, although I took the advice of senior Muslim colleagues seriously when they warned me to do it in a mild way in order not to come into trouble, not to alienate my Muslim students and lose my visa. I continued to work with

this orientalist and critical methodology and had a wonderful time in Indonesia. I am still yearly invited for guest lectures, where I continue to teach a mixture of traditional Islamic and modern western critical interpretations of the Qur'an.

At one time, during my period of work in Indonesia, a British artist came to my office in the Islamic university. He worked as a lecturer in western music at the Arts Academy. He was appointed to set up programmes that would be more attractive for western tourists. He had fallen in love with a Muslim girl, wanted to marry her, and her family agreed under condition that he should become a Muslim. He asked for my advice in this matter. I took him to the leader of the mosque at the campus and one week later a solemn ceremony took place for his confession of Islam. To my surprise I was on the list of witnesses and was invited to give a small talk after he had pronounced the confession of faith. In my talk I congratulated him on his move from being religiously inactive towards a serious and conscious stage of religious quest, reading many books, discussing Islam and declaring religion to be a serious matter for his marriage by taking this step. But on the same occasion I criticised the *imām* leading the ceremony for the formula of confession. The imam suggested or even stipulated that the candidate openly renounced Christianity and its doctrines before accepting Islam. I bluntly stated that to the best of my knowledge Islam accepts the scripture, basic doctrines and practices of Christianity as true religion. Therefore I deemed it not appropriate that a new Muslim should renounce Christianity. In the discussion that followed after the ceremony most of my academic colleagues, all of them Muslims, agreed with me, although they would not always express it with the same frankness.

These personal anecdotes are described here to underline the basic idea behind this book, that Islam is a member of the same reading community as Jews and Christians. They retell the same stories, truly with some different accents, but it is all done within the same religious narrative tradition. Also during my work in the universities of Leiden and Utrecht, from the late 1980s on, teaching Islam to fairly orthodox Reformed students, I often had to defend the thesis of the close relationship between Islamic and Christian narratives and teachings. It was not

uncommon that a professor of Old Testament Studies asked whether the exodus from Egypt under Moses is also mentioned in the Qur'an (it is a major theme and repeatedly mentioned). A colleague in New Testament studies could publish without hesitation a book on 'modern studies of Jesus' without mentioning one single Muslim author. In these circles it is not a practice to take the Muslim stories about Jesus seriously! This book hopes to provide the most basic material for them in a mixture of the best of the Islamic studies in the western academic tradition and some good representation of Muslim traditional beliefs about Jesus.

Not a lot has changed in the English-speaking world since Geoffrey Parrinder commented in 1965 that 'The teaching of the Qur'an is still little known in the Christian and western world' (Parrinder 1965:10). Parrinder's book *Jesus in the Qur'an* is still necessary and valuable. There are, however, some basic differences between this book and that by Parrinder. This book puts all the texts in their Qur'anic context, taking the chapters or suras of the Qur'an as literary units. It does not want to harmonize between the different suras as is easily done by Parrinder, but it seeks also the differences between the various texts and finally even tries to reconstruct a development that took place during the early years of the Islamic revelation. This growth must be seen as another step in a longer process that is not yet completed: to describe a historic and a modern view of Jesus.

Besides these more personal remarks about this book, a general view of the Qur'an as a whole must be given here.¹ The Qur'an is a difficult book for non-Muslim people to read. It is unlike either the Hebrew Scriptures or the Christian Bible, which are essentially assembled documents to be read either privately or in public worship, or studied individually or in study groups. The Qur'an is an assembly of revelatory disclosures, intended to be recited and heard. Qur'an means 'recitation'. In Islamic communities the Qur'an is recited on all kinds of occasions,

¹ The latter part of this preface has been conceived and written by the translator of the whole book, Dr. Simon Rae who worked in Indonesia in the 1970s and was later Principal of Knox College in Dunedin, New Zealand.

privately, in families and in small or large assemblies of the faithful. People learn by heart the first chapter as quoted above (which enjoys something like the place the Lord's Prayer has in Christian circles) and some of the shorter chapters. In Islamic countries competitions are held to encourage and develop the careful recitation of the Qur'an.

Because it is intended to be read and heard, and because sections were revealed at different times, the text of the Qur'an can sometimes seem difficult to non-Muslim readers. Sometimes there is not the flow we might expect and topics are sometimes introduced abruptly. Topics or issues are not always fully explored, and we are sometimes left with the question, 'what does this actually mean?' Commentaries by Muslim scholars can help us to understand how these and other passages were understood in the communities of the faithful.

Another difficulty we experience is that the Qur'an sometimes records sayings and events in the lives of people we know from Jewish or Christian scriptures. Some of these stories are presented in fragmentary form, and others are difficult to reconcile with what Christians already know. We will see examples of this in the discussions to follow, and some ideas on how this all came about. It is helpful also to remember that the Qur'an, like the Bible, is not given as a source of information but is intended to call people to faith and obedience, to affirm the oneness and power of God, to urge people to forsake their errors and to seek wisdom and knowledge.

The Qur'an, as we will see in what follows, is an Arabic revelation, originally for the Arab people who (unlike their Jewish and Christian neighbours) had no holy scripture in their own language. For a long time Muslim people have resisted translating the Arabic text believing that a version in another language could only be an 'interpretation' of the Qur'an. Recitation in other languages also appears inappropriate. As Islam becomes more and more an international faith community this resistance is diminishing and most western readers will now find a translation in their own language, perhaps alongside the Arabic text.

Some long-common English habits need to be broken. Since the vowels 'o' and 'e' do not occur in Arabic we should write Qur'an not Koran, and Muhammad not Mohammed and

Muslim not Moslem. The faith of Islam should never be called 'Mohammedanism' or its adherents 'Mohammedans'. The faith is Islam (a word that denotes surrendered to God, and is closely related to the Arabic and Jewish words for peace - *salām*, *shalom*), and those who follow the faith are Muslims.

Today western writers on Islam speak of 'God', using the name by which the one God is known in our own languages. Allah is the Arabic name for God and is honoured and used by Muslims and Christians in Arabia and Palestine and in countries whose languages have enjoyed a strong Arabic influence, from Malta to Indonesia. English writers now realise that to use 'God' when speaking of Christian and Jewish belief and 'Allah' when speaking of Muslim belief confuses this reality and leaves the impression that there are two different 'gods', and the suspicion that one might be the enemy of the other. Some Muslim people also report that they find the rather flat western pronunciation of 'Allah' difficult to listen to, so it is out of respect and not as a sign of disregard that we speak of 'God' in our discussions with Muslim friends.

The structure of the Qur'an is also unique. It is divided into 114 chapters or *sura(h)* of very unequal length, each of which has a title, and each *sura* is divided into verses (the Arabic word *āyah* (plural *āyāt*) also means 'sign', a word used often in the Qur'an for the miraculous signs that verify a prophet's authority). Verses contain a varying number of sentences, and verse division depends on the rhythm and cadence of the Arabic text. *Sura* denotes a step or degree by which we ascend; some were revealed intact, others were assembled by the prophet from revealed portions.

The first very short *sura* is called 'The Opening'. Thereafter the chapters are arranged in order of length, from the longest to the shortest, and numbered accordingly. This seems to be the reverse of the order in which the *sura* or their components were revealed and two editions familiar to English readers attempt to follow a chronological order: the early Darwood English translation published by Penguin Books in 1965 and the Rodwell translation published by Dent's Everyman's Library in 1909 and frequently reissued. A standard Arabic text was published in Cairo in 1925, whose verse arrangements differ from some western editions, so books about Islam often give

both references. Citations from the Qur'an in what follows are translations of the author's text, which is based for the most part on Leemhuis' Dutch translation.

The prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca in about 570CE into a family of the merchant elite. Because of the resistance towards his message, Muhammad accepted an invitation to become political and religious leader in Medina. This turn is sometimes regarded as a change from the prophet to the statesman (see the title of Watt 1960). In the commentaries this change in context is often explained as a change in character as well. Muhammad's move to Medina, the *hijra*, took place on 16 June 622, and this date marks the beginning of the Muslim era, in which years are designated AH. He died in June 632 CE. Often sura are identified as revealed in Mecca or Medina, and Muslim commentators pay considerable attention to the context and circumstances in which a revelation was received as an aid to interpretation, an example the present author follows.

The historical context: Christians in Muhammad's environment

At the outset we could ask whether one actually needs to know the historical context of the relevant passages before we can gain a good understanding of the Jesus verses in the Qur'an. There are two reasons why for some it might not be necessary to do this, so the reader should feel free to pass over this introduction and begin directly with the discussion of the text. The first of these reasons is the viewpoint held by a number of Muslims that the Qur'an existed eternally and was revealed directly to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel. Why in this case would the historical context have any role to play in interpretation? Secondly there is the style adopted by the Qur'an itself. In it there are only a few references to concrete circumstances in the life of Muhammad. There are no Christians named in it, or precisely identified. There are also no direct citations from books of the Bible. So it appears at first sight as though there is little need for understanding of the text of the Qur'an to give attention to the varied groups of Christians in the wider circle of Muhammad's Arabia.

However, an introduction that deals properly with the modern patterns of research in the science of religions must, for all that, give attention to the historical context. The Qur'an reacts clearly to particular forms of Christianity, agreeing with them or rejecting them. Why was this? What precisely is being put right in the Qur'an? To come to a good understanding of the Jesus verses in the Qur'an it is necessary that they be placed in the precise context of the origins of the Islamic movement, and of the clear reaction of the Jews and Christians in Muhammad's environment. For our purpose there are two different angles that must be considered. First of all we must position the Qur'an over against the internal development of Arabian society and of the special position of Muhammad within it. Secondly we must become familiar with the religious developments in both the close and the more distant surroundings of the Mecca of Muhammad's time. In this way we will naturally give attention also to the Jews, the Manicheans, the Persian Mazdaists, and

eventually to the followers of John, but more especially in this introductory chapter we will catch a glimpse of the Christians in Arabia itself and in the nearest of the surrounding regions, seeing their diversity and the possibility that Muhammad had contact with some of them.

Religion in sixth-century Arabia: the story of (false) gods and goddesses

Arabian culture and religion, before the coming of Muhammad, is characterised as a 'time of unknowing' or *jāhiliyya*. In the classical writings it was depicted as a time in which there was no respect for life, in which girls were not valued and were often even buried alive. It was also, above all, a time of the cult of idols. According to some accounts there were 360 idols in the Ka'ba, one for each day of the year. There were goddesses worshiped, such as Al-Lāt, Al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, who are named in sura 53 of the Qur'an. A male deity, Hubal, was identified as having a special association with the Ka'ba of Mecca.

According to tradition the veneration of Hubal originated in the region of Mesopotamia, in Iraq or in what is modern Jordan. At the beginning of the third century he would have been brought to Mecca by a prominent branch of the Khuzā'ah tribe who found healing in hot springs in Jordan, and for that reason would have taken an image of the deity with them. Originally Hubal was a deity associated with a group of stars or a constellation. In Mecca he functioned especially as an oracular deity whose trusted predictions were determined by the casting of lots. It is also credibly thought that this Hubal was seen as some kind of exemplary figure who was later identified with the prophet Abraham, and that he had played an important role in the genesis of Islam.

Popular horror-evoking supernatural figures were Asaf and Naila, a man and wife, who had had sexual intercourse within the Ka'ba of Mecca and as punishment for this Allah, the supreme deity, changed them into stone images. They stand above the well Zemzem, a powerful spring of water of great economic importance in that it attracted many caravans to call at Mecca. In Islamic times the Zemzem well was identified with

the spring from which Hagar found water for herself and for her son Ishmael, after Abraham had sent them away.

According to Ibn Ishaq there was also a painted picture or icon of Mary and Jesus in the Ka'ba. During the purification of the Ka'ba at the end of Muhammad's life there was a woman present from the Christian-Arab Ghassan tribe of North Arabia. Seeing the icon she said, 'My father and mother may be called as a pledge: you are truly an Arab woman'. At that the prophet Muhammad ordered all the images of gods to be taken out of the Ka'ba. Only the icon of Jesus and Mary was allowed to remain. This strengthened the speculation among some later Christians that the Ka'ba had previously been a site of a Christian cult. However, there is no firm evidence for this.

The Qur'an itself frequently calls on the believers to renounce the worship of the many gods, to worship the one God and to destroy the images. This teaching was often associated with the prophet Abraham. In at least three passages (6:74-90, 19:41-50 and 21:51-70) Abraham tells how he had at one time destroyed the idols of his people except one. At that time he said to his father, 'The surviving deity is the greatest for he has vanquished the other gods', whereupon his father, a trader in images, recognised that in fact the idols had no power at all, but that his son Abraham had single-handedly ruined his business. This is a story that also appears in the Talmud. We may therefore suppose that Arabic culture in general was already tending toward monotheism, and therefore borrowed arguments from Judaism and Christianity. In the formation of the Qur'an this aversion for the ignorance of polytheism and a turning toward the veneration of a single deity is one of the important points in the message of Islam.²

Religion in sixth-century Arabia: the socio-political developments

The Arabic word *jāhilīya* was used too with a meaning quite different from 'ignorance'. It signified originally pride,

² On the picture of Jesus and Mary in the Ka'ba: Guillaume 1955: 552. Other references in the McAuliffe (ed) *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, III, p 475-483 (Hawting on Idolatry). An informative introduction to pre-Islamic Arabia is Hoyland 2001.

gallantry, the negative sense of recklessness and above all else the macho attitude: an excessive pride in the honour of the family and especially the clan. In pre-Islamic poetry masculinity and pride were frequently considered to be the highest virtues. Over against this pride or sturdy self-sufficiency stood another virtue, amiability, gentleness (*halīm* as the opposite of *jāhil*).

In the years between 1950 and 1960 western researchers came to the conclusion that the ethics of the Qur'an were a reaction to changing socio-economic circumstances. In this view, Mecca was a merchant city, where the elite participated in a growing trade with the surrounding lands. In the city the old tribal affiliations were in part becoming lost. There were no longer clan leaders who carried responsibility for the widows, or for the weak in society. The merchant elite conducted themselves in a spirit of individualism, withdrawing from social obligations in order to seek greater profits from investment in more trade caravans. Over against all this the ethics of the Qur'an came into being as a defence of the weak in an urban society becoming more and more individualistic. Trade was the real motor for the growth of Mecca, which led to a spiritual and moral crisis. The town needed a new social and spiritual equilibrium. The language of the Qur'an for this reason frequently includes financial terminology.

Muhammad provided a new ethic in place of the old solidarity of the tribe, which was disappearing. He offered a moral directive for rich (and poor) individuals. Neither the tribal connection nor the honour of the clan or of the family provided a basis for solidarity with the weak, the poor, widows and orphans. Everyone holds their wealth only temporally, from the creator, and each must later render an account. Faith in God as creator, and judge on the day of judgement, became the basis for a new moral élan. Because of his prophetic activity Muhammad was put out of the town and was forced to go into exile in the agricultural oasis Medina, about 400 kilometres away, where he was asked to seek peace among two large Arab and three Jewish tribes.

These semi-marxist reconstructions by Rodinson and Watt take little account of the legacy of traditional Arabian polytheism. This tradition had lost its existential meaning according to these scholars. The most important philosophy of

life at this period was a kind of 'Arabian humanism', built of tribal honour, family pride, and above all else the manliness (*jahāla*) of the great individual leaders. However, the new economy had undermined the tribal traditions and because of this a new way of life was emerging.

We find the social-prophetic role of Muhammad mostly in the earlier Meccan period, shortly after 610, when he was aged between 40 and 52 years. Robinson and Watt do little with the material borrowed from Judaism and Christianity that is found in the later Meccan and especially in the Medina revelations. In the debate with the Meccans there are references to the Jewish and individual Arabian prophets, put forward particularly in the defence of Muhammad's role. In the Medina period (622-632) Muhammad was, according to Watt, to be seen no longer as the Meccan prophet, but is to be regarded more as a statesman.³ In this period, however, references to Judaism and Christianity, and to versions of them, are in fact much more numerous.

Five non-Arabian churches

Christianity in the wider environment of Muhammad's Mecca and Medina is well documented. But the closer we come to the cradle of Islam in West and Central Arabia, the fewer data we have about Christians. Besides, we must also keep in mind that it was not twentieth-century western Christianity that was found in the environment in which Muhammad grew up. Nor was it modern Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The precise form of this Christianity can only be a matter of approximation and conjecture.

An examination of the widest area of Muhammad's Arabia reveals five major streams of Christianity: three in the north (the Byzantines, Syrian Monophysites and Persian Nestorians), and two in the west (the Copts in Egypt and the Abyssinian Christians in what is now Ethiopia).

³ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman*, London: Oxford University Press, 1960.

1 Byzantines. From the East-Roman empire of Constantinople (by now known as Byzantium) came the state Christendom of the great councils that accepted at Nicea (325) the recognition of the doctrine of the Trinity (one God in three persons) and at Chalcedon (451) the two natures in one person doctrine (Jesus as the Son of God and fully human). The original adherents of these doctrines were for the most part Greek or Hellenised people from the upper echelons of these regions. This was a Greek-speaking and emperor-dominated Christendom, that from the tenth century had many Arab believers who were not Greek speakers, and who received the name Melkites (literally ‘kingly’ or ‘royal’). The northern region of the Arabian Peninsula was on the boundary of the sphere of influence of the empire. In 614 the Byzantines were driven out of Jerusalem by the Persians, and during Muhammad’s lifetime, between 626 and 629, they retaliated. The Qur’an has a reference to this in sura 30 verses 2-6 (where Rome and Roman must be understood as referring to what we now know as Byzantium):

The Roman empire has been overcome
in a land nearby, and they
after their defeat shall be victorious!
But only watch in a short time,
with God is the decision sooner or later,
then shall the believers laugh, glad
in God’ succour.
He helps whom he will,
and he is mighty and merciful.

God’s promise. God never breaks his promise!
But most people do not understand this!

Although more often than not a reference in the Qur’an does not point with absolute certainty to a particular historical event, we can conclude that there is here a reference to the defeat of the Byzantines by the Persians in 614, just a few years after the first revelation to Muhammad was received in Mecca. The believers who shall laugh we may well take to refer to the revenge of the

Byzantine army against the Persians in the years 626 to 629, precisely in the period when Muhammad was becoming a successful leader of the new Muslim community in Medina. The most important centre of the Byzantine church in the region that is today Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Arabia was Antioch.

2 The Nestorians In this period the adversaries of the Byzantines, the Persians, were a religiously mixed people. In 247 CE, after the rise of the Sassanid kingdom that ruled Persia 226-641CE, Mazdaism, the later development of the teaching of Zoroaster (ca.600BCE), was the state religion. The Sassanids were more tolerant than the Byzantines, who barely tolerated other religions at all and even caused severe difficulties for the Jews in Palestine. The three important minority religions in the Persian kingdom were Judaism, Christianity and Manichaeism. The first two were found especially in the towns of Mesopotamia, present-day Iraq. There they formed small communities, mostly of migrants from regions of the Byzantine empire such as Palestine, Turkey or Western Syria. In their liturgy they did not use Persian, but Aramaic, also known as Syriac, a Semitic language, distinctly different from both the Greek of the Byzantines and the Persian national language, but closely related to Arabic.

The dominant form of Christianity was Nestorianism, named after the priest Nestorius who was expelled in the decrees of the Council of Ephesus (431). He had argued that the declaration that named Mary the Mother of God could come to mean that the human person of Jesus would become too closely absorbed in his divine nature. According to him the human nature and the divine nature in the person of Jesus must remain distinguished. The Nestorian Church had its supreme head, the Catholicos, who resided in Seleukeia-Ktesiphon on the banks of the Tigris, close to present-day Baghdad. This place was also the winter capital of the Sassanid kingdom.

It is thought that the Qur'anic teaching about Jesus shows an affinity with that of the Nestorians. In this the person of Jesus is clearly distinct from the Godhead, which did not experience the suffering the body of the human person had undergone.

3 The Monophysites The third non-Arab church in the region of Arabia was that of the West-Syrian, Aramaic speaking Christians of modern Jordan and regions of Syria. These Christians rejected the compromise formula of the Council of Chalcedon, in which the unity of Jesus as Christ was confessed, in the form of two separate natures, human and divine. They acknowledged only a single nature in Jesus Christ, only the divine, and were therefore named Monophysites. There followed a long period of great changes, in which they rejected both the patriarch of Constantinople and the formulas of the Council of Chalcedon.

There was also the unusual situation that the Emperor Justinian (527-565) was pro-Chalcedon while his wife, Theodora, who came from Syria, gave support and protection to the Monophysites. She supported the consecration of Jacob Baradeus, who became the bishop of Edessa and being expelled from that position by the Byzantine church of Antioch organised a separate Monophysite church in Syria. This Syriac-Aramaic speaking church would later, for this reason, be known as the Jacobite Church, although that name is no longer in common use. In the later Islamic historical writings the Christians are generally divided into Melkites, Nestorians and Jacobites.

Jacob Baradeus died in 578 (when Muhammad was just 8 years of age), the leader of a strong and self-assertive, specifically anti-Byzantine, church that had its base in the south-eastern regions of the Byzantine Empire. There were also a few establishments of this church in the Persian kingdom, especially in the capital Seleukeia-Ktesiphon.

4 The Copts A fourth Christian church in the Middle East was the Egyptian church that grew around the patriarchate of Alexandria in the Nile delta. In this region Old Egyptian was spoken, more generally called Coptic. This, however, was not the official language of the land and church under a Byzantine domination that lasted until the rapid Arab conquest in 641, just ten years after the death of Muhammad. Until this Islamic conquest the Greek of Byzantium was the official language. Problems developed here following the Council of Chalcedon (451). The compromise formula of 'one person, two natures' in

Christ was not acceptable to the patriarch Dioscurus. There were also church-political reasons. The Council of Chalcedon (held in a suburb of Constantinople) had declared that the patriarch of Constantinople was to be second in rank, after the patriarch of Rome, and so to be of higher status than the other eastern patriarchs who consequently should in part come under the authority of Constantinople. This was too much for the Egyptian patriarch, who saw his church as the largest in the world at that time, and at the same time a church with many martyrs, confessors, great theologians and ascetics. Dioscurus was deposed but he did not accept his sentence of deposition. The result was a split, through which there came to be two patriarchs in Alexandria, one Greek-speaking supported by the dominant Byzantines of Constantinople, one Coptic-speaking who in matters of faith rejected the dogmatic decrees of Chalcedon and became a Monophysite.

5. *Abyssinian Christians.* The fifth body of Christians in the regions around Arabia was that of Aksum or Abyssinia, present-day Ethiopia. More will be said later concerning the origins of this Christian presence, because around 350 they established a close connection with those in southern Arabia, in present-day Yemen. This Christian community was also for the most part Monophysite and accepted neither the Council of Ephesus nor the Council of Chalcedon.

For this reason the two councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon (431 and 451) are recognised as calamitous events for the Christians of the Middle East. They brought about a schism between the Byzantine Greeks of Constantinople and the Christians in the extended areas that they controlled. In these areas the Greek-speaking Byzantines were considered to be the representatives of a colonial church, whereas the Nestorians, the Jacobites and the Copts felt themselves to be bonded with the local populations.

Concerning the Christians, the Qur'an says more than once that they are in disagreement with each other. The great contrast between the Byzantine Greeks and the people they ruled in the Middle East is one of the reasons why the Islamic movement was able, in the ten years following the death of

Muhammad in 632, to overrun the greater parts of Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Mesopotamia as far as Persia.

Arab Christians without an Arabic holy scripture

The wider circle of Christian societies around Mecca and Medina that we have discussed in the previous paragraphs was already quite complex. The religious and political divisions do not give for this region the picture of an homogenous and harmonious Christian religious movement. It was as complex as anything we find in the Arabic-speaking world. There were three important geographical groupings to distinguish here. The first and most important was that of the Christians of southwest Arabia. The origin of these Christians as well as those of Ethiopia is a matter of debate. In general scholars agree that a connection existed between these two regions. Christianity came from South-west Arabia (modern West Yemen) journeying in the direction of Aksum, the capital of the early Abyssinian Christian kingdom. Beside this, both regions had a shared history from the beginning of the Christian era.

There was Egyptian influence in Ethiopia, while in Yemen there was the Jacobite connection, from West Syria, but also Nestorians from the Persian Empire. In fact it was not only in Syria and Palestine but also in Yemen that the struggle between the Byzantine and Persian empires raged. In 520 an Ethiopian army crossed over the southern branch of the Red Sea, in an alliance with the Byzantines. In revenge for that, and to secure independence from Ethiopia, a local sympathiser with Judaism, Yusuf Zunuwās, spread his own religion and caused many deaths among the Christians in the town of Najran. The veneration of the Christian martyrs of Najran is amply documented in non-Islamic sources. It is conjectured that the first verses of sura 85 refer to this persecution, on which occasion the martyrs were thrown into a pit and burned:

By the heavens, with their watching constellations
and the day, so long awaited.
By the witness and what is kept in mind.

Death to the makers of the hole of fire, the fuel,

while everyone sat nearby.
They were witnesses of all they killed.

They (the Jewish assailants?) nourished only resentment
against them (the Christians of Najran?)
because they believed in God the almighty, the
praiseworthy,
the one to whom the lordship of heaven and earth
belongs.
And God is witness to all things.

In this text the word witness occurs three times: firstly in the introductory formula of affirmation, a conventional part of a sacred text. The second occurrence is in connection with the evil party who caused the martyrdoms, while the third is applied to God. The Arabic word *shahīd* has the double meaning of 'witness' and 'one who dies for the faith', as does the Greek word *martyr*.⁴

The following fragment about the Christians of Yemen, called Himyār in this period, is found in sura 105 of the Qur'an. This short text reads:

See you not how your Lord dealt with those of the
elephant?
Did he not make their foolish plan come to nothing?
A flock was sent, a company compact
and so hard stones crashed down on them!
And in this way they were turned into bare-eaten straw!

The historical context of this at first-sight rather obscure text is presented in the oldest surviving account of Muhammad's life, that of Ibn Ishaq. A Christian ruler of Yemen, Abraha, had built a colossal cathedral in the capital, Sana'a, to be esteemed as the greatest in the world. Abraha wished to promote pilgrimage on that account and saw the west-Arabian holy city of Mecca as a great rival, which he planned to seize. An army, accompanied by

⁴ The Christian documents are published in Shahid, 1971. Muslim sources in Guillaume 1955: 17. Further discussion in Paret 1971:505-6.

an elephant as its greatest military vehicle, set out for Mecca. At a short distance from the city the elephant refused to go any further. In the meantime Abraha's troops had seized two hundred camels as booty from Abdul Muttalib, Muhammad's grandfather, who came to Abraha in order to negotiate their return. Abraha said that he single-handedly could annihilate the Ka'ba as a holy place. Laconically Abdul Muttalib replied that he himself only had an interest in the camels, for they were his property. The gods of the Ka'ba should deal with the attack on their sanctuary themselves. He himself would only care for his own business, the camels. The following poetic couplet refers to him:

*O God, an ordinary man defends his house. You
therefore defend what is yours.
Do not let their cross and craft hold power over you.*

The following morning the elephant took off back to the south, in the direction of Yemen. It was not possible to restrain it. After that came a dramatic attack by birds. In the account by Ibn Ishaq, 'Thereupon God sent birds from the sea, swallows and starlings. Each bird carried three stone, as big as peas or lentils, one in its beak and two in its claws. Everyone who was hit died, but not all were hit. Abraha's men fled the way they had come and crying out for Nufayl ibn Habīb (an Arab guide) to guide them on the way to Yemen.' During their retreat many were struck down, one after another. Abraha also was struck. When men took up his body the fingers of his hands had fallen off and a stench of pus and blood was smelt where the fingers had been. The disintegrating corpse was brought back to Sana'a. Abraha's son Yaksum succeeded him. This was said also, according to some sources, to be the first year in which measles and smallpox were observed in Arabia and that people saw bitter spices such as rue and colocynth. This miraculous defence of Mecca and its holy site took place according to standard Islamic history in 570, the year in which Muhammad was born.⁵

How might one think of this tale so abundantly provided with miracles and supernatural phenomena? Abraha is in any

⁵ Guillaume 1955:21-26

case an historical figure, recognised also in Byzantine sources as a powerful person, perhaps an African slave or a mercenary soldier, who advanced against the Ethiopians to become the king of an independent Yemen-Himyār. That however did not last long. In 575 the Persians conquered southern Arabia, a region which until then was regarded as a vassal of the Byzantines.

Around that time there were pro-Persian princes or viceroys in Yemen. In the towns there were considerable groups of Christians as well as communities of Jews and the followers of traditional religions. From March 630 to March 631 a delegation from the most Christian of the towns, Najran, travelled to Medina to negotiate with Muhammad for special privileges, as will be discussed more fully in the commentary on the Jesus verses in sura 3. Shortly after the death of Muhammad in 632 Yemen also came under Islamic-Arabic influence.

We find a second centre of Arab Christianity in the northwest of Arabia where the greater part of nomadic tribe of the Banu Ghassan lived in an alliance with the Byzantines. Their region was more confined than that of the old Arabic kingdom of the Nabateans that up to the third century had encompassed regions of Jordan and more especially Sinai. We must look for the Banu Ghassan particularly in what is today Jordan and southwestern Syria (around present-day Damascus).

Their leader al-Hārith (in Greek, Aretas) was acknowledged by the Byzantines in the sixth century, and called 'patriarch'. In opposition to the patriarch of Alexandria, and with the assistance of the Empress Theodora mentioned above, he was able to decree the episcopal consecration of Jacob Baradaeus of Edessa. In the Byzantine Empire politics and religion were always woven very closely together but the Arab tribes, on the boundaries of the empire, enjoyed some political and spiritual freedom. The consecration of Baradaeus took place in 542. In that same year also a bishop was consecrated for the Banu Ghassan, one Theodosius, named the 'bishop of the encampments'. These encampments were the places where the nomads set themselves up temporarily, often in the vicinity of clusters of holy graves. Al-Hārith, whom some also recognised as king, had taken pains within the Byzantine church to win room for priests and bishops who rejected the Council of

Chalcedon, and who were thus Monophysites. As a result of the good relationship with Theodora that strategy was successful. Beside this he had, like his successor Munzir (569-82), much involvement with the internal debates among the Christians. During a visit to Constantinople in 563, just seven years before the birth of Muhammad, he brought with him a document by Jacob Baradaeus in which the heresy of tritheism, belief in three-gods, was condemned. This reminds us of the reproach of the Qur'an (4:171 and 5:73) that some say God is three. (Trimingham 1979:182-4)

A third more or less Christian Arab region was that of the Lakhmids in what today is south Iraq. Here people were more settled and the city of Hira, not so far from Ktesifon (close to the modern city of Baghdad) situated on the Euphrates, was their urban centre. Their rulers were nearly all non-Christians but they were very tolerant, as was usually the case within the sphere of influence of the Persian empire. In 410 Bishop Hosea of Hira was present at the synod of Ktesifon, where the Nestorian church gave itself an organisational structure. In 420, at the synod of Markabta, the Nestorian church organisation formally separated from the Byzantine church and from the patriarchate of Antioch, finding a place in the region of the Lakhmids. In the city of Hira and its surroundings there was a great number of churches and monasteries. The first ruler who converted to the new faith was Nu'man IV, who around 592 openly confessed the Christian faith. The Lakhmid people were known for their poets and there are many reminders of Christian poets kept alive through the writings of later Muslim historians.

The region of the Lakhmids lay along the boundary of Byzantine influence so the region also frequently changed hands between the Persian and Byzantine empires. During these enforced changes we hear of conversion attempts, made from the Byzantine side. The latest of these gave rise to the story that in a period of Byzantine success an embassy was sent by patriarch Severus of Antioch to Munzir III (506-54). When the two Monophysite bishops came before the ruler he acted as if he were in great confusion and sadness. Only after some time the ruler wished to tell the bishops that he was so shocked by something he had just heard, that the Archangel Gabriel was

dead. At that the bishops explained that angels are not physical beings and because of this they cannot die. At that Munzir said that he could believe that angels should rather than that the divinity, in unity with the humanity in one single nature, could die on the cross. The story appears improbable, especially given the possibility of the ruler himself being uncertain about becoming a Christian, and also in regard to how the debates between the different forms of Christianity were conducted. But we will again encounter the doubt about the divine nature dying on the cross, in the discussion of the Qur'an 4:157. (Trimingham 1979:188-201)

Contextualisation of the Jewish-Christian message

Was there also at this time an Arabic Bible translation, or at least the translation of one of the gospels? In general it is assumed that there was no authentic Arabic translation, either oral or written. The Palestinian theologian Mitri Raheb has recently focused on the absence of Arabic in the liturgy of these Ghassanid, Lakhmid and Najran Christians, and consequently also in their hymns, prayers and Bible readings. In his interpretation of the origin of Islam, Raheb sees the Ghassanids and the Lakhmid Christians of Hira as following the Syriac liturgies of their respective mother churches, because they were by this time firmly bonded with them. They had never had their own synod or other form of organisational structure, and remained as an inferior Arab minority within the Syriac-speaking Monophysite and Nestorian churches. The Abyssinian Christians had a Ge'ez translation from the end of the fifth century. But the Najran Christian in Yemen were also a Syriac-Monophysite enclave in Arab territory and had no translation of their own.⁶ Raheb sees the heart of Muhammad's activity as the creation of a separate Arabic revelation. After God had given a Hebrew revelation to the Jews, a Greek revelation to the Byzantines, a Syriac revelation to the Monophysite and Nestorian Christians, and a Coptic revelation to the Egyptians and a Ge'ez to the Ethiopians, he now gave to the Arabs a

⁶ Sydney Griffith in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (McAuliffe 2001:I,313-5)

revelation in their own language (see Qur'an 12:2: 'We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an').

According to Raheb, it was Muhammad's basic idea, running parallel to the Ethiopian, Coptic-Egyptian, Greek and Syriac churches, to found an authentic Arabic national church, an independent society and state, not by way of translating texts but by way of a new revelation of God through a prophet belonging to their own authentically Arab people. This idea was to dominate the revelations especially in the middle period of Muhammad's activity, in the late Meccan period and in the early Medina period. The Qur'an is not only salvation history and instruction; it is also at the same time a prayer book and law manual. Raheb characterised Islam as a project for the Arabic contextualisation of Christian society. (Raheb 2003)

However attractive Mitri Raheb's position is it has also attracted a lot of comment. He gives much attention to the Christian aspect and much less to the Jewish. It has been well said that the Jewish roots of the Qur'an are rather weak, that it includes little Rabbinic material and that the Jewish material could have come by way of Christian sources. But that analysis can be called into question because the small number of Jesus verses, in comparison with the large quantity of material about Moses, Abraham and other prophets. Moreover there was hardly a Jewish presence in Mecca whereas this was very significant in Medina where three Jewish tribes dwelt, part of the great Jewish tract in northwest Arabia, to the north of Medina. Neither in Mecca nor in Medina was there ever a majority of Christians. Of the few 'known Christians in Muhammad's environment', Waraqah bin Naufal, a nephew of his wife Kadiyah, had already died shortly after Muhammad received his first revelation. Two of the group of four 'god-seekers' or *hanif* around Muhammad converted to Christianity in Abyssinia or in Constantinople. (Trimingham 1979:263) The last of these had already died before the first revelation. So we are not permitted to view the origins of Islam as arising out of Christianity alone.

Jewish-Christianity?

Concerning the nature of Christianity in central Arabia and in the immediate surroundings of Mecca and Medina, it is difficult

to give precise definitions that fit the main currents of modern Judaism and Christianity. Arend van Leeuwen, radical advocate of a theology of secularisation in the 1960s, wrote a remarkable verdict in his great book, *Christianity in World History*,

The truth is that when Islam was still in the initial stages of its development there was nothing likely to prevent the new movement from being accepted as a peculiar version of Arabian Christianity. In fact the Christianity of some of the Abyssinian tribes, when once they had adapted it to their ancient traditions, differed much more drastically in many respects from what we understand by Christianity than did Islam. (Van Leeuwen 1964:218)

In 1887 Julius Wellhausen, known to Bible students particularly as the ‘inventor’ of the four-sources (Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly) theory of the origin of the first books of the Bible, had used a Latin-Greek description of the Arab Christians: *Arabia ferax haereseon*. Arabia that is so unruly with heresies and schisms! There one must not expect to see the official teaching of the Byzantine state church, nor yet the doctrine of the various national churches of the east. No. The land was satiated with ‘obscure sects that one and all were stuck fast at a primitive level and closely related to the Jews.’ (Rudolph 1922:6)

In these rather negative terms we must observe a fragment of historical truth. First of all we must consider the term by which the Christians are distinguished in the Qur’an. There they are called *Nasara*, a word that can point us to the Jewish Nazarene who, like Samson, took a vow, but which later became more especially connected with Jesus, the man from Nazareth. Around 400CE *Nazara* was used by Jews (in the Talmud) for Jews who believed in Jesus (the so-called Jewish-Christians) in Syria. In this case, in the Qur’an and in the life of Muhammad, we should not choose between Jews or Christians, all the more so because an intermediate form between both these great traditions appeared. The problem with this solution however is that there remain no concrete traditions belonging to

these probably small groupings who had a place close to Muhammad.⁷

What then must be our conclusion to this historical tangle, not to speak of labyrinth? First of all, there is much data concerning the Jews, and more still concerning the Christians, in the wide environment of Mecca. There are Syriac, Egyptian, Ethiopic, as well as Arab Christians. But the more closely we come to west Arabia, the *Hijāz* and the town of Mecca the less data there is. Notwithstanding all these doubts, for the understanding of the Jesus verses of the Qur'an it is useful to have a notion of the rich and varied history of Christianity in these regions. Muhammad had heard of many of their stories and customs and had as well some direct contact himself. From this he might have taken into account that in the Arabian regions there was nowhere an absolute and predominant Christian majority. It was often little more than a political alliance with the Byzantines or the Ethiopians. Ultimately we must build up the Qur'anic picture of Jesus out of the texts of the Qur'an itself.

⁷ See Steenbrink 2002. Recently Hans Küng (with Joseph van Ess) argued sharply for seeing the place of Islam against the background of the small Jewish-Christian sects, also stressing the Jewish-Christian roots of Manichaeism. See Hans Küng 2004:62-78.

Strengthened with the Holy Spirit

Sura 2:87, 136 and 253

Advice for the reader: we have set out the discussion of the Jesus verses in this book according to the order of the Qur'an. The reader can select another sequence without problem. For many it might be better to begin with sura 19, after that 3, after which the other chapters might be read or studied. The most detailed and coherent episodes concerning Jesus are found in these two suras 3 and 19. Elsewhere there are usually brief references, found within entirely different contexts. It might also be helpful to begin by reading the conclusion.

The second sura is by far the longest of the 114 suras or chapters into which the Qur'an is divided. It is located after the first or opening sura, the Prayer of the Seven Verses, *Al Fātihah*, (The Opening), which is the best known and loved prayer in Islam, comparable to the seven-versed prayer of Christianity, the *Our Father*. From the second sura the chapters are arranged according to reducing length. The name adopted for the second sura, *Al Baqara* (The Cow), embodies a reflection, in the passage 2:67-74, on the cattle offerings mentioned in Numbers 19:1-10 and Deuteronomy 21:1-9. An amplification of the account in Deuteronomy 21 (concerning purification after a murdered person is found outside an inhabited place) is the miracle that when a piece of the flesh of the sacrificed cow came into contact with the murdered person he stood up and revealed the murderer. But notwithstanding this, and all the miracles of Moses, 'the hearts of the Jews were like stone'. We will go no further here with these specific verses but give only an outline of the main structure of this sura and then turn to the three verses that speak of Jesus.

In 622, after a period of twelve years laboriously preaching in Mecca, Muhammad accepted the invitation of a mixed delegation of Jews and Arabs from the town of Yathrib (later renamed Medina), to become their spiritual and temporal leader.

Muhammad was on his father's and mother's sides related to the two mutually contending Arab clans of Medina. His message about the one God, preached in line with the Jewish-Christian tradition, appeared to make him a suitable person for the Jewish population of Yathrib-Medina, but all too quickly it became clear that the Jews could not accept Muhammad as a prophet or religious leader. This led to an ever-deepening gap with the Jews of Medina, which resulted in the banishment of two tribes and eventually even the massacre of the last remaining Jewish tribe.

The second sura is also appropriately named the 'Little Qur'an' in that we find in its impressive structure all the basic themes of the young, and by this time independent and plainly distinct, religious movement of Islam. This happens sometimes in connection with the older traditions, especially Judaism. Stories of Adam, Moses, Abraham and David were taken up again to stress the continuity between the traditions, but at the same time correcting them. Several of the Jewish religious traditions that had been taken over by the early Muslims were rejected and transformed in the second section of the sura. The direction of prayer is no longer toward Jerusalem, but toward Mecca. Fasting is no longer on the Jewish day of Ashura or Yom Kippur but in the month Ramadan. Drinking wine was rejected, and the old Arabic holy places, the Ka'ba of Mecca and Mt Arafat near Mecca, became the centres for the annual Haj-pilgrimage. In connection with this, sura 2 has two distinct language types. After a testimonial and exhortatory beginning concerning the importance of the revelation given by God there follows here, also in the form of a book, a meditation on Adam (30-40), on Moses (49-123 developed as a polemic with the Jews of Medina), followed by an episode concerning Abraham (124-141), viewed not as the great progenitor of the Jews but first of all of the Muslims and Arabs. After this narrative and instructional first section, in the second section of sura 2 a number of prescriptions are formulated whereby the young Muslim community can distinguish itself from the Jews through an alternative direction of prayer toward Mecca (142-164), fasting during Ramadan (183-187) the haj pilgrimage (196-200) and the rejection of wine (219).

In between there are as well prescriptions concerning inheritance, the holy war, a teaching narrative concerning Saul

and David (246-253), stipulations concerning sexual intercourse, alms, and consideration of God's nature, essence and being (the Verse of the Throne, 255: God who neither sleeps nor slumbers, always holding the world in being).

The three sections that mention Jesus appear almost casually. In contrast to Moses or Abraham Jesus does not fulfil here any major role in the history of salvation. He functions here however in the same polemic: all prophets have to suffer from the refractory attitude of their people. They are rejected. This is especially said concerning Moses. In the middle of the Moses passage, as a narrative section that becomes more and more polemical, words are then said concerning Jesus:

- 87 *We gave Moses the book
and we have followed him with later messengers
and we gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear signs
and strengthened him with the holy spirit.
But whenever there comes to you a messenger
with something you did not seek
are you not then puffed up with pride?
Some you accuse of falsehood and others you kill!*
- 88 *And they say: Our hearts are circumcised.
Well no! God has cursed them for their credence.
How little it is that they believe.*
- 89 *And when a book came to them from God
confirming what they had
-although they had prayed for succour against the
unbelievers-
when what they should have been aware of came to
them
they did not believe in it.
God's curse comes in this way on the unbelievers.*

87 *Signs*. In the Jesus verses more emphasis is put on the miracles than in the case of most of the other prophets. The 'proving' (Arabic *bayyināt*) is a fixed feature of these miracles of Jesus, as is also the term 'sign' (*ayat*).

87 *The holy spirit*. This expression occurs frequently in connection with Jesus. Sometimes it is a name for Jesus himself. At other times, as here, it is an external figure, especially an intermediary in the birth of Jesus. Through the Muslim commentaries it came to be identified with the angel Gabriel, who brought a message to Mary. The manner in which Gabriel did that took on rather graphic forms, in the commentaries and in the popular stories of the prophets. The legend that Gabriel had blown into Mary's mantle, whereupon Mary put it on and so began her pregnancy, is wide spread.

87 *And others you killed*. The whole sense of *But whenever there comes to you a messenger...* in slightly altered form is also found in 5:70, where it is not immediately connected with the story of Jesus. It is not difficult to see in this a reference to the parable of the wicked vinedressers in Mark 12:1-12 (also Matt. 21:33-43 and Lk 20:9-19). But on the other hand it is not easy to give concrete examples from Islamic stories of prophets who were not only slandered and waylaid (and there were many) but were actually killed. The classical commentator Jalalayn (in fact a revision of the commentary by a certain Jalāluddīn as-Suyutī made by a later Jalāluddīn al-Mahallī) said explicitly: 'then you charge some with lies (like Jesus) and others you kill (here the uncompleted past tense must be read as a completed past tense, 'you have killed them') as in the cases of Zechariah and John'. The violent deaths of these last two were not mentioned in the Qur'an or in primary Islamic sources. For that reason modern commentaries will give no examples at all, or will interpret the text as referring to an attempt to kill. Shihab gives as examples, in connection with 5:70, Joshua, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, David, Moses and Jesus. Failed attacks had been committed on them (Shihab 2000:I,245). Maulana Muhammad Ali himself is even more vague and translates, 'and you would kill', with the intended implication: 'if you could do it'. He offers as an explanation that the Meccans had tried to kill Muhammad. Muhammad Asad, refers here not only to Matthew 21 but also to 1 Thessalonians 2:15

‘(the Jews) who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and have persecuted us...’, but he offered also the interpretation that they had died willingly (Asad 1980:19). Hamka supposed that the unbelievers were refractory toward all the prophets and attempted to murder them, but he gives as concrete examples the cases of Zechariah and of John the Baptist (Yahya) who was a prophet at a very young age and was put to death. Hamka supposed, without being specific, that there were approximately fifty to seventy Jewish prophets who were put to death by their own people. (Hamka 1966:I,216)

88 *Our hearts are circumcised.* We find in the Qur’an very little direct reference to the Biblical text. It is rather more a free paraphrasing, but the echo of an original Bible text is heard here. In Leviticus 26:41 and Jeremiah 9:25-26 this metaphor had already been anticipated.

89 *And when a book came to them.* We must read this especially as a judgement on the Jews of Medina. The book is the Qur’an, which in the opening verse of this longest sura was characterised as a book, a writing. If we read ‘those who are the unbelievers’ as the Meccan opponents of Muhammad, then we must understand the second line of this verse as the request made by the Jews who went to Muhammad to seek an alliance. In fact Muhammad was already on his way to Medina at the request of a delegation of Arabs and Jews. The Jews remained unfaithful to this invitation.

136 *Say: We believe in God,
 in what is sent down to us
 and in what was sent down
 to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and the tribes
 in what was given to Moses and Jesus
 and in what was given to the prophets by their
 Lord.
 We make no difference between any one of them
 And we have submitted ourselves to Him.*

The little word 'say' appears 570 times in the Qur'an, not unlike the Old Testament phrase, 'Thus says the Lord', employed as an editorial addition to indicate the viewpoint that the whole of the Qur'an is God's word to Muhammad.

We often find parallel verses in the Qur'an, which appear in a variety of suras. This verse is wholly identical with 3:84 with the exception of a single small phrasing. That is indeed exceptional, in that the duplication usually is limited to a single word or at the most a few words. This is a quite long parallel section. It is a basic theme in the teaching about the prophets in the Qur'an that the important people who mediated God's revelation are in principle alike. The word 'submitted' sounds in Arabic, 'muslim'. In most places in the Qur'an this word is not only applied to the followers of one specific religion, but has also the basic understanding of those who are committed to God, surrendered. The word can also be translated appropriately as 'submitted'

Following a passage concerning David and Saul there is a last verse on Jesus in this sura

253 *Those are the messengers.
We have preferred some above others.
To some of them God has spoken and to some
He has given higher degrees (of honour).
We have given Jesus, the son of Mary, clear signs
and have strengthened him with the holy spirit.
Had God so willed, the succeeding generations
would not have fought each other, after the clear signs
had come to them.
But they were those who were at variance with one
another.
Some of them were believers, but others were
unbelieving.
If God had so willed, they would not have fought one
another, but God does what he wills.*

Sura 2 has in total 286 verses but here we draw near to the conclusion. After a first reflective section in which the prophets

Adam, Abraham and Moses especially play the key roles, there follows a second section (from 144) with practical regulations for the young Muslim community.

Here Jesus comes to the fore in a verse that forms part of the conclusion of this 'little Qur'an'. What is said here of Jesus is mostly a literal repetition of what is said in 2:87. There is nothing significantly remarkable in that. We will see repeatedly that there are very many parallels and repetitions occurring in the Qur'an.

The context leads to two other matters. Firstly there is a difference between the messengers (and prophets). This seems to be in opposition to verse 2:136, discussed above, where it has just been explicitly put forward that all prophets are alike: '*We make no difference between any one of them*'. There it is stated that the prophets are alike, here that the messengers are different. We can seek the solution in the difference between prophets (*nabī*, plural *anbiyā*, men with a divine revelation), and messengers (*rasūl*, plural *rusūl*), men who are sent on God's behalf to a community to bring a relatively new teaching about duty, bringing with them a system of commands and prohibitions. Another solution is that prophets are alike in value and worth, but in their different embodiments each one has an individual quality: only Moses spoke directly with God, Solomon was the richest king, Joseph, son of Jacob appears to be the most handsome. In this series Jesus is the most ascetic, mystic, near-to-God. Secondly, the focus here is not centred to such an extent on the difference between the messengers and prophets, but rather more on the mutual discord between the different religious societies. God could have given humankind a single faith. Why did he not do that? Here a fairly simple answer is given: *But God does what he wills*.

In 49:13 a more profound answer is given:

*O mankind we have created you man and woman,
and we have made you into races and tribes,
so that you may learn to know each other.
In truth: the most honoured among you in God's sight
is the one who has the greatest piety.*

Piety (*taqwa*) could also be translated as ‘God-fearing’, ‘the fear of the Lord’. It stands not only in contrast to malicious but also to perverse or hypocritical piety.

Grandson of Imrān

Sura 3:35-63 and 84

The third sura of the Qur'an is named after Imrān, the father of Mary. The name Imrān itself, besides appearing in the title, is mentioned in sura 3: 33-35 and in 66:12. He is mentioned as Amram, the father of Moses, Aaron and their sister Miriam, in Exodus 6:20 and Numbers 26:59. Also in Exodus 15:20 'Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister' is mentioned. Is this a historical error whereby Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron and Maryam-Mary, the mother of Jesus, have been wrongly combined? The identification of the two Marys is also found elsewhere. In the Qur'an 19:28 Maryam-Mary is referred to as the 'sister of Aaron'.

Muslim commentators are conscious of the problem and ask themselves whether this does not point to there being two Imrān-Amrams, who between them had Moses and Aaron as sons and Miriam-Maryam-Mary as a daughter. Was this 'mistake' (or exchange) so general among the people in Muhammad's environment that the text of the Qur'an itself was adapted to the usage of that time? Or may we accept that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a distant descendent of Imrān-Amram and that this is what is indicated here? This is the elegant solution proposed in Geoffrey Parrinder (1969:64). In this respect many proposals have already been made, from both the Muslim and the Christian sides. We must not, however, draw too many conclusions from the name of Mary's father; besides, it is not suggested anywhere that Muhammad thought that Mary had been a sister of the prophet Moses and that because of this the historic Moses and Jesus also would have lived close to each other in time. Such a placing in a different time occurs elsewhere: the Jew-hater in the time of Esther, Haman, is placed in the Qur'an as a contemporary of Pharaoh (Qur'an 28:6).

There is much in the long third sura that is a reflection on the development of the young Muslim community in Medina.

Verses 1-32 call for faith in the revelation to Muhammad. Clearly this revelation occurred in an atmosphere of opposition. Thus verse 19: 'The religion before God is Islam [=surrender to God]. Those to whom the book is given [=the Jews] are those who have come into conflict with one another, after the knowledge had come to them. And if any of them do not believe in God's signs, then God is swift in calling to account'. The hard words at the end of this verse notwithstanding, the earlier tone is that of a sermon and of a sharp polemic.

Verses 33-64 present the story of Jesus as exemplified in God's revelation to humanity. Verses 65-68 go further in this manner, concerning the history of Abraham, with a strong emphasis on Abraham as a true Muslim, with the meaning of someone who surrendered to God. The conclusion is stated in verse 67: Abraham was before Torah or Gospel: 'Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian, but he was a follower of the pure faith, which surrenders the self to God, and he did not adhere to those who served many gods'. Here Abraham becomes associated with two terms.

First of all he was a *hanif*, frequently translated as a 'follower of the true faith'. This word was clearly a technical term from the international religious vocabulary. It occurs twelve times in the Qur'an and of these eight times in relation to Abraham. Probably the word comes from a Syriac word *hanpo*, a term for 'pagan', that is to say someone who is neither Jewish nor Christian but an adherent of a local or tribal religion. In this sense we could take this to be a sort of beggar-name, a negative designation that was adopted to become in time a title of honour. In the Qur'an it has clearly become a designation of pride, a particular category apart from the adherents of polytheism, apart from and certainly not less than the best of the Jews and the Christians. In this section Abraham is, as in the second sura, clearly associated with the Ka'ba and in this way his role as an Arabian prophet is emphasised.⁸ Verses 69-109 are for the most part a polemic against the 'people of the book', by which we may particularly understand the Jews. But some warnings are directed to, 'you the believers', that is the new Muslims. In

⁸ On the question of Abraham's pre-Muhammadan association with the Ka'ba and Mecca, see also Hoyland 1997:187-9 and 535-8.

verse 84, discussed further below, we find also a pronouncement on the equality of all prophets.

Many scholars situate verses 110-200 after the lost battle against the Meccans at Uhud near Medina, in March 625, at the end of the third year after the decisive removal from Mecca to Medina. This battle was thought of as a spiritual crisis for the young Muslim society.⁹ The Jewish tribes had not supported Muhammad in the conflict and were not inclined to acknowledge his religious pronouncements. A leading Jewish clan, the Qainuqa, was exiled a year earlier on account of an offence against an Arabian tradeswoman. The woman sat on the ground to sell her merchandise. A few Jews had bound her clothes up so tightly that she was largely naked when she stood up. This inappropriate jest had severe consequences. In the second part of the sura we find, beside consolation for the fallen Muslims, arguments against the Jews.

Among didactic, comforting and polemical passages is the Jesus section, the large unique narrative portion of this long sura. Here we see (as in the comparable sura 19) a combination of the story of Zechariah, the father of John ('the Baptiser', here as elsewhere named Yahya), with that of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It begins with the birth of Mary, followed by the birth of John, after which the story of Jesus is taken up.

Some fragments of this passage are literally identical with the version in sura. 19. For instance the reaction of Zechariah on the announcement of the birth of a son, where the literal agreement is italicised:

Sura 3:40 He (Zechariah) said: <i>A little boy for me? And I am very old. And my wife is barren!</i>	Sura 19:8-9 He [the angel] said: 'So it is. God does what he wills.' <i>He said: 'a little boy for me? And my wife is barren! And I am very old.'</i> He said: 'Surely it will be so, your Lord has declared: 'it is easy. Have I not already created you out of nothing and nothing at all?'
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⁹ Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, p 27 speaks of a 'spiritual chaos'.

We see here that the first three short sentences are literally the same. Only the order in the two versions is different. There is also a striking parallel to 3:41

Sura 3:41

He said: 'Lord, give me a sign.'

He said: 'You will not speak to people for three days, except by means of signs. And commemorate your Lord much and offer praise in the morning and evening.'

Sura 19:10-11

He said: 'Lord, give me a sign.' He said: 'You will not speak to people for three nights although you are neither ill nor unwell.'

He came to his people, out of the holy place, and showed them that they must praise God in the morning and evening.

A further literal parallel is to be found in Mary's reaction to the announcement of her pregnancy.

Sura 3:47

She said: 'My Lord, how shall I have a son? No man has touched me!' He said: 'It is so. God creates what he will. When he decrees a thing he merely says to it: 'Be!' and it is.'

Sura 19:20-21

She said: 'How shall I have a son? No man has touched me! And I am no sinner'. -He said: 'It is so!' Your Lord has said: It is easy for me. So that we will make him a sign for people and a mercy from our side. This is a thing decreed.'

The final declaration by the angel, 'Be! And it is', appears also in sura 19:35. However, there it is placed at the conclusion of the story, in the polemical and not in the narrative section.

The conclusions, 3:51 and 19:36 are completely identical: 'God is my Lord and your Lord. Therefore serve him. This is a straight way.'

There are further telling resemblances but also a number of distinct differences between the two versions of the story:

1° Only sura 3 has any mention of Mary's father, Imrān, and of her birth.

2° Zechariah is the father of John in both stories, but is here also the guardian of Mary in her education. He is witness to the miracle of nourishment, by which she was given food in her locked cell.

3° Only here do we find the scene of the drawing of lots, by which it was decided who would become the guardian of Mary (a somewhat similar story is found in the apocryphal Gospel or Proto-evangelium of James, although there it involved Joseph).

4° Only in sura 3:49 do we find a comprehensive summary of Jesus' miracles (signs), from making birds of clay to healing the blind and those who suffer from leprosy, and bringing the dead to life.

5° Here and in some other passages of the Qur'an, though not in sura 19, we find that Jesus can introduce some changes in the Torah.

6° The disciples of Jesus are mentioned explicitly as those who remained true in the growing resistance of the Jewish majority.

7° Jesus' death is also mentioned in sura 19, but in that place in a common ending formula, that is applied also to John ('the Baptist'). Here in sura 3 it is explicitly stated that the stratagems of the unbelievers will not succeed. No explicit mention is made here of the Jews. Only in sura 4 was it explicitly set out that the humiliating and nullifying plans of the Jews for a crucifixion would not succeed because God has appeared as saviour.

8° The rhyme is, as in the later suras, in a weak schema of -īn, -ūn, -īm, or -ūn and the verses are also considerably longer than in sura 19, so that here we must actually speak more of the end of strophes than of verses.

In sura 5:110 a great number of topics from episodes out of sura 3 recur, frequently in literally identical wording. For an overview of this refer to sura 5:110.

The history of Jesus, son of Mary, according to sura 3.

[Introduction]

- 33 God has chosen Adam, Noah, the people of Abraham
and the people of Imrān over all the inhabitants of the
world,
34 As offspring of one another.
God hears and knows.

[Mary's birth and youth]

- 35 At that time Imrān's wife said:
My Lord I consecrate to you what is in my womb;
Accept this of me.
You are the one who hears and the one who knows.
36 When she had given birth, she said:
My Lord, I have given birth to a female child.
God knows best what she had given birth to,
Maleness is not the same as femaleness.
37 Then her Lord accepted the child kindly
And cared for her so that she grew up well
And he entrusted her care to Zechariah.
Whenever Zechariah entered her sanctuary to visit her
He found she had food and provisions.
He said: 'Mary, from whence have you these things?'
She said: 'It comes from God, for God gives sustenance
To whom he will, without measure.'

[A child for Zechariah: John]

- 38 There Zechariah called to his Lord.
He said: 'My Lord, grant me a good posterity.
You are the one who hears prayer.
39 Then the angels called to him,
While he was standing in the sanctuary to pray, saying:
God announces John to you,
Confirmer of a word from God,
Leader, ascetic and prophet,
One of the pious.
40 He said: 'My Lord, how can I receive a boy
Seeing that I am old and my wife is barren?'
He said: It is so. God does what he will.
41 He said: 'Give me a sign.

He said: 'Your sign is that for three days you
shall not speak with people,
except by means of hand gestures.
And commemorate your Lord well,
And offer praise in the evening and in early morning.

[The Annunciation and birth of Jesus]

- 42 At that time the angels said:
'O Mary, God has chosen you and made you pure,
and he has chosen you above all the women of the
worlds.
43 O Mary, worship your Lord in humility,
Prostrate yourself before him
And bow down with those who bow down.'
44 That is a unique announcement concerning the unseen
which we reveal to you. You were not with them, when
they cast lots with reed pens concerning which one of
them would be the guardian of Mary, nor were you with
them when they quarrelled over this matter.'
45 At that time the angels said:
'O Mary, God announces to you a word from himself,
whose name shall be the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary.
He shall be held in high honour in this present life and in
the life hereafter
And be of those who are close to God.
46 In the cradle and as an adult he will speak to people
And he shall be one of the righteous.'
47 She said: 'My Lord, how can I receive a child when no
man has touched me?'
He said: 'It is so. God creates what he will.
When he decrees a thing he merely says to it, 'Be', and it
is.
48 And he shall teach him the book, the wisdom, the Torah
and the Gospel.
49 And a messenger to the Israelites':

[Address of Jesus 'as a baby in the cradle']

'I have come to you with a sign from your Lord;
In that I make out of clay something for you as if in the
form of a bird,

And blow into it so that by God's permission it becomes a bird.
 That I shall heal those born blind and those who suffer from leprosy
 And raise the dead to live, by God's permission.
 And that I declare to you what you may eat and what you may store in your houses.
 In this is a sign for you if you believe.
 50 and I have come to you as one who confirms what was of the Torah before my time,
 and to make lawful certain things that were forbidden to you.
 I have come to you with a sign from your Lord.
 Therefore fear God and obey me.
 51 God is my Lord and your Lord, so worship him.
 This is a straight way.'

[Resistance to Jesus: only the apostles follow him]

52 When Jesus became aware of their unbelief, he said:
 Who will be my helpers, for God?
 The disciples said: We are God's helpers. We believe in God.
 Bear witness that we have submitted [to God].
 53 Our Lord, we believe in what you have sent down
 And we follow the messenger.
 Therefore write us down as among those who bear witness.

[Jewish plans to kill Jesus, God's deliverance]

54 They made plans and God made plans, but God is the best plan maker.
 55 At that time God said: 'Jesus, I let you die
 And I shall lift you up to myself.
 And cleanse you of those who are unbelievers.
 Then shall you all return to me
 And I shall judge between you concerning whatever you are in dispute about.
 56 What then concerning those who are unbelieving?
 I will punish them severely hereafter.
 They will have no helpers.

- 57 What then concerning those who believe and do virtuous deeds,
 To them he will give a full recompense.
 58 That is the message we recited to you concerning the signs and the warning of wisdom.
 59 For God Jesus is like Adam.
 He created him out of earth.
 Then he said: 'Be!' And he was.

Context

In the classical commentaries the historical context for the Jesus verses in sura 19 was given as the migration of a group of Muslims from Mecca to Abyssinia (present day Ethiopia). Their purpose, around the year 618, was to avoid the trouble in Mecca and to seek support from the Christian ruler, the Negus, on the other side of the Red Sea.

Concerning the Jesus section of this sura 3 a story is given of a delegation of Christians from Najran, a town in the northern part of the mountainous country of Yemen in South-west Arabia (today in the southwest of Saudi Arabia). Christianity had arrived there through a certain Faimiyun (also Hayyān), a merchant from Najran who, while in Syria, was instructed and baptised by an acquaintance.

This man had made so many followers that in fury Yusuf Zunuwās (ca. 523-560) the king of Yemen turned to Judaism. This caused a conflict in which so many victims fell, that the city was called *marturopolis*, or the 'city of martyrs'. After this attack by the ruler of Yemen/Himyar in 523 there came a counter-attack by the Abyssinian Negus who took the city 'into protection' and established its Christian character. The people of Najran were named Balharith after their ruler Aretas, or Al-Hārith ibn Ka'ba. Byzantine sources mention the city as the seat of a bishop, probably of the Monophysite Christians, as in Syria. According to Christian sources they used the Syriac version of the Bible, although they themselves spoke Arabic. The Persian conquest of this territory in 575 could also have brought with it a stronger presence of Nestorians. After the hard measures taken against the Jews of Medina between 624 and 627 the Christians

of Najran would have come on their own initiative to conclude a treaty. Some old sources speak of a letter Muhammad sent to them in the name of the people of Islam. A delegation of three men (other sources speak of two monks, while others of a company of sixty), including the governor and the bishop, first of all proposed a test by ordeal. Perhaps we might think here of an event such as is told in 1 Kings 18, where on Mount Carmel Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to bring rain by prayer. Ultimately the trial by ordeal did not take place, instead the parties later concluded a pact, according to which the city of Najran should send to Medina twice a year 1,000 items of clothing as a form of submission and tribute. In the event of war they should send thirty coats of mail, thirty horses and thirty camels to the Muslims of Medina.

The Qur'anic commentaries describe God's and Muhammad's answer to the Christians of Najran, namely the descent of this passage of the revelation. A peculiar incident was the fact that the Christians performed their Christian prayers in the Medina mosque. Some Muslims made objection to this, but Muhammad instructed that they should not be hindered. In the oldest written account of Muhammad's life, that of Ibn Ishaq, is written:

'They were Christians of the Byzantine rite, although they were in disagreement with one another over several points, so that they said: He [Jesus] is God, and: He is the Son of God, and: He is the third person of the Trinity, which is the teaching of the Christians. They argued that he was God, because he used to raise up the dead, heal the sick, declare what is unseen, make birds out of clay then blow into them so that they could fly. All this was done through the command of God the almighty [Qur'an 3:39]. 'So that we make him a sign for the people' [Qur'an 19:21]. They argued that he was the son of God because he knew no father, and could speak in the cradle and that is something that no other descendent of Adam has ever been able to do. And they argued that he is the third of three because God himself speaks thus: 'We have done, we have ordered, we have created, and we have decided'. They say: 'If he should be one, God would have said: 'I have done, I have created and so on. But he, God, is Him and Jesus and Mary'. As a result of these

observations the reading [sura 3] came down.’ (Guillaume 1955:271-2)

In Ibn Ishaq’s life of Muhammad this story is placed in February 624, shortly after the transformation of the form of worship, thus in the second year after the migration. Other commentators link the dialogue with the people of Najran and the establishment of a special tribute or tax (*jizya*) for non-Muslim believers or people-of-the-book, after the conquest of Mecca in 630. It is now difficult to determine whether this story, written by Ibn Ishaq around 180 years after Muhammad’s death, really offers a concrete reference to this important sura. There were certainly many discussions between Muhammad and individual Christians, in Mecca and Medina as elsewhere. Najran was without doubt one of the important locations with many Christians in South Arabia. Nevertheless, the whole story by Ibn Ishaq sounds rather like a free commentary on the Qur’an, amplified with other material. This appears all the more so because Ibn Ishaq harmonised material out of sura 3 and sura 19, by means of a confused mixing, into a continuous story, as can be seen in the citation above. We need not know this story to understand sura 3 on Jesus.

Structure

The life of Jesus can be presented as a drama in five acts. We use the word ‘drama’ intentionally here, because the text is a dialogue like a text from the theatre, rather than a prose text with a continuing story. The five episodes are: 1° The birth of Mary the daughter of Imrān, but brought up by Zechariah, who also prayed for a child of his own, who was given to him in the person of John. 2° The annunciation to Mary concerning the birth of Jesus. 3° The active life of Jesus, especially his healing and preaching. A discussion by Jesus himself about his life forms the transition to what follows. We can perhaps read this discussion in the form of the discourse in the cradle, as suggested in 19:30-33. Or is this more the harmonisation of two parallel but certainly not identical passages? 4° The growing conflict between the disciples who believe in Jesus and the unbelievers who will bring Jesus to his downfall. 5° The

dramatic period when people devise plans and where God intervenes for Jesus, to raise him up.

35: *My Lord I consecrate to you what is in my womb.* The biblical story of Mary (who has no husband) and Elizabeth (with Zechariah) who are unable to have children, resembles similar stories about Abraham, Isaac and Samuel found in the Jewish Scriptures. The dedication before birth occurs also in the case of Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11). In the Bible the mother of Samuel is named Hannah or Anna, just as in the apocryphal Christian gospels this also becomes the name of Mary's mother. The classic commentator Tabari also gives Mary's mother this name, Hannah bint Faqud bint Qabil, while the wife of Zechariah is named Elizabeth in the older commentaries. The modern commentaries are much more cautious in taking over information that is not in the Qur'an and which may have come out of the Jewish-Christian tradition, and could for that reason be identified as *Israiliyāt* or 'Jewish intrusions'.

The surprise of Mary's mother that she would receive a daughter, who naturally could not undertake any temple service that was reserved to males, is also in line with this tradition. A way out of this dilemma was proposed in the form of a kind of hermitage in the vicinity of the temple, or following some accounts she was immured within the temple.

37: *Provisions.* In the apocryphal Book of James (also known as the *Protevangelium*), chapters 7 and 8, it is said that Mary was taken to the temple to serve, at the age of three. Concerning the problem that arose when she was twelve years of age, that she could become unclean (read: menstruate), a ceremony was held with walking staffs to select a husband for her. Book of James VIII:1 also relates that she was fed in a miraculous way: 'Mary was in the Temple...and she received food from the hand of an angel'.

42. *He has chosen you and made you pure.* Of the two acknowledged Christian accounts of Jesus' childhood, Matthew's Gospel concentrates on Joseph, who experienced various appearances of the angel in his dreams. In contrast, the Gospel of Luke is wholly focused on Mary, who received by

day a single appearance of the angel. Clearly the account in the Qur'an is related to the Gospel of Luke. There are, however, hardly any literal echoes to be heard. Only here we may think of Luke 1:42, '*She said, 'Blessed are you among women.'*' But even here there is no direct quote. The expression, *He has chosen you* also appears in almost wholly identical form in the introduction to this episode:

3:33 *God has chosen Adam, Noah, the people of Abraham and the people of Imrān over all the inhabitants of the world, 34 as offspring of one another.*

This would indicate that this choosing applies to all prophets. Nevertheless it is applied here particularly to Mary without a direct link to her son, Jesus. With reference to the purification the Iranian Qur'anic scholar Allama Tabataba'i (1904-1981) wrote:

Thus her choosing means that she was accepted a good acceptance for the worship of Allah; and her purification implies that she held fast to the protection of Allah. She was therefore a chosen one who was protected from sin. It has also been said that her purification means that she was a virgin who did not menstruate—thus she was not obliged to go out of the synagogue at any time. There is nothing wrong in this explanation although the meaning given by us is more in conformity with the context. (Tabataba'i 1983:VI,6-7)

The word used here for chosen (*astafa*) is one of the most beloved honorifics conferred on Muhammad, *Mustafa*. Alongside the '99 Beautiful names' for God' (*al-asma-al-husna*), there are litanies with names for Muhammad, the honourable names (*al-asma-al-sharifa*) sometimes also numbering 99. Reverence for 'the name Muhammad' arose in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the same period in which, influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153), the honouring of Jesus' name became popular in Christendom.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, McAuliffe 2001, III: pp 501-05.

43: *Humble*. The Arabic word used here (*qunut*) later became especially understood to signify a devotional prayer. The commentaries draw especially from this exhortation to Mary an encouragement to the faithful to be humble and to pray often. Ibn Kathir wrote in this respect that Mary so often prayed that she developed swollen ankles, the Islamic equivalent to the Catholic ‘prayer knees’, the thickening of the skin caused by frequent and long kneeling. Also the bowing (*sujūd*) is especially understood in the context of ritual prayer.

44 *Reed pens*. According to the account in Numbers 17, Aaron’s staff sprouted as a sign of his high dignity and election, an event that appears in the apocryphal Gospel or Proto-evangelium of James as a kind of oracle concerning the selection of a husband for Mary, but there with the staff of Joseph. All of the candidates were required to deliver up their walking staffs, but only that of Joseph sprouted. Here, in the selection of a guardian for Mary, reed writing-pens were used. The same word for ‘reed pen’ is used here as was used in what is frequently considered to be the first revelation in sura: 96:4, where it was said of God that he instructed by means of a writing pen.

Some commentaries maintain that this event concerns the indication of Zechariah as Mary’s guardian, as described in verse 37. Many older accounts link this verse with Mary’s becoming an adult (or her first menstruation at the age of twelve years) on which occasion either a new guardian or a spouse had to be chosen for her. Ibn Ishaq mentioned that the one chosen to succeed Zechariah was an ascetic, Jurayj, ‘a carpenter of the sons of Israel’. (Guillaume 1955:275)

45: *A word from him*. Christian readers are reminded in verse 45 of four weighty theological titles for Jesus: ‘Word’, ‘Messiah’, ‘held in honour’ and ‘close to God’. These are four descriptions that are almost exclusively used for Jesus. Only the last, ‘near to God’, is also ascribed to certain angels. Thus we find here echoes of a high doctrine concerning Jesus. However these terms were not further elaborated in Islam: they appear like stray meteorites from another planet that have appeared in the centre

of a new environment, and which might therefore be interpreted in a variety of ways.

The meaning of the term 'Word from Him' is in the Muslim commentaries adapted to general Muslim doctrine. Here Jesus is called Word of God, but not in the sense of the first chapter of the Gospel of John, where the Word of God was itself God, in the beginning, in conformity with the Hellenistic *Logos* doctrine. Muslims usually read a kind of reduced meaning: Jesus is not born as a result of a sexual encounter but through the word of God. Thus it is not an echo of John 1:1-2, but perhaps of John 1:12-13 that was applied to all believers, children of God: 'who are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh or of the will of a man, but of God.' Precisely through that word of God Jesus came into being, on which subject the commentators have varying opinions. In total eight suggestions have been proposed by classical commentators such as Tabari and Razi. The most interesting of these suggestions are that: 1° The angel gave a message to Mary. So 'word' is not a title of Jesus but is to be understood more as the message of annunciation. 2° Jesus is God's Word in that his coming into existence is occasioned by the divine command: 'Be!' (see: 3:47, 59 and 19:35). 3° Word is an arbitrarily chosen name for Jesus, just as a name has been given to all creatures. 4° Jesus was named 'Word' because he had spoken in the cradle. 5° Through a word thoughts and secrets were made known, which is also what Jesus has done in his appearing. 6° Jesus was foretold in the writings of the earlier prophets. (Räsänen 1971:31)

The two 'high titles of Jesus', Word and Messiah, occur also in 4:171, amplified with the title Spirit. In the fourth sura we may well consider a conclusion that is in line with this sura 3:45. There the Spirit is also an angel, the intermediary who speaks the word to Jesus. A few Muslims read this to mean that the Qur'an is 'Word of God', thus a direct expression of the single divinity, an access to God and a reflection of him. But that is an exception. In 19:34 Jesus is named 'Word of truth'. We shall see there that, in the earlier Meccan sura, this might perhaps be understood in a manner different from this later Medina sura.

The later Islamic tradition received, like Christendom, much influence from Neo-Platonism, in which the one God is

disseminated to the multitude of the known creation by way of a number of intermediate phases. The first phase of this emanation was never the Word Jesus, but more often the elemental spirit or the light (*nur*) of Muhammad. (Steenbrink 1998:85-91)

The second title, or attribute, given to Jesus here is Messiah. The Arabic *masīh* has caused quite a few problems to the commentators. Linguistically purist scholars, who maintain that the Qur'an is an Arabic revelation (see Qur'an 12:2, 43:3, 20:113, and similar verses), trace every word of the Qur'an back to its Arabic root. Clearly *masīh* comes from one of two verbs: *masaha*, to sweep/wipe or smear, to anoint (used in the Qur'an for washing with water in the purification ritual) or *sāha* for 'journey'. The latter term would then apply to the itinerant prophet. The first explanation is close to the Hebrew understanding of the anointing bestowed on Jewish kings and prophets. In most commentaries it has been seen as a kind of proper name. But this would not be a family name (the genealogical connection would be indicated by *bin[t]* or *ibn*, 'daughter or son of') but rather a sobriquet that could have been given to a person for one reason or another. Modern Muslims do not see the designation Messiah for Jesus as a special title any more than most educated European people, apart from the strictly religious, see in 'Christ' more than the 'surname' of a person named Jesus by his mother. Jesus who will return to the earth plays an important role in the Islamic expectation of the end time, as we see in sura 4:159 and especially in the later *hadith*, but that was not considered in connection with the high title of *masīh/messiah*.

The terms 'in high honour' (Arabic *wajīh*) and 'being in the nearness of God' (*maqarrab*) were not so broadly expounded by the commentators. The first relates especially to the great estimation of Jesus arrived at by his followers and all the faithful (Al-Maraghi). The second is connected with 4:172, where the same word *muqarrab* that was used for the special category of angels who stand close to God's throne is applied to Jesus as an ascetic prophet, who all his life stood close to God. Al-Maraghi sees a special place for Jesus, close by God's seat at the time of judgement, at the last day when all people shall see how close this servant is standing to God.

We must see this titles of exalted status as information that Muhammad heard from Christians during a later phase of his prophetic ministry. On the basis of the revelation in sura 19 we can conclude that these titles were not yet known in usage in an earlier stage. In 4:171 the most important titles are reiterated (son of Mary, messenger of God, God's Word), with only one addition, namely Jesus is called a Spirit from God. May we accept an internal diversity and progression in Muhammad's becoming conscious of the mystery of Jesus? If so then it is in the sense of a consciousness of a prophet Jesus, who like other similar figures received a revelation, a general confirmation of the possibility of a revealing God. Then by way of a more precise elaboration of the attributes of Jesus he comes also to a clear categorisation of the Christians. As with the breach with the Jews by way of a precise understanding of Abraham that went along lines other than the usual Jewish interpretation, so the separation from the Christians went by way of a partial acceptance of the stories and writing about Jesus. A sharp barrier was drawn by the notion of Jesus as God's child and in consequence also the doctrine of the Trinity, while the other titles of honour were commented on in the light of this. Below, in connection with verses 54-55 we will need to say more on the question of the denial of the crucifixion of Jesus. Was this to emphasize the peculiar the Islamic position? Or was it just an alliance with the Christian tradition in debate with the Jews? The high titles of 3:45 give per se no justification for the growing division between the community of Muhammad and the Christians of his time.

47: *Be and it is*. This formula returns in the related conclusion of 3:59. It is through God's powerful and creating word that Jesus is born, without the action of any man. The Arabic *kun fa yakun* has in later times taken on a function similar to the western *hocus pocus pilatus pas*, also originating from religious texts (the Latin *Hoc est enim corpus meum*, 'this is my body', from the liturgy of the eucharist and 'suffered under Pontius Pilate' from the Confession of Faith).

48: *The book, the wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel*. Are only two holy scriptures intended here, that is to say the Torah for the

Jews and the Gospel for the Christians? Or must we see this as a reference to four holy books? In 4:54 it is stated, ‘We have surely given to the people of Abraham the book and the wisdom’. Similar combinations appear in 4:113, 2:129, and 3:81. So do ‘book and wisdom’ reflect the pre-Mosaic, Abrahamic revelation that eventually came (again) in Muhammad to the Arabs? Of the three well-known terms that make up the word Tanakh (Torah, Nebiim or prophets, Ketubim, cognate with the Arabic *kitāb* for book) two are also found in 3:79, ‘It is not for anyone to whom God has given the book (*kitāb*), the wisdom (*hikmah*) and the office of prophet (*nubuwwa*) that he should say to the people, “Become worshippers of me rather than of God”’.

49: *I have come to you*. Without further introduction the text changes here from speaking about Jesus in the third person (as ‘he’) to speak in the first person (‘I’). Was this the speech in the cradle, in which the baby Jesus outlined the path of his life for the people who had accused his mother of impurity (thus 19:29-33) or is this a common self-affirmation of Jesus? So the question remains about where this came from. May we think here of a Jesus hymn of the Arab Christians?

49: Miracles done *by God’s permission*. It is twice stated in the list of miracles in this verse that Jesus does miracles ‘with God’s permission’. It seems, however, almost like an economically worded footnote by a strict literary scholar who wants to maintain God’s highness compared with an exalted, but nevertheless simply human, Jesus.

It is the Finnish New Testament specialist Heikki Räisänen who has commented, on the basis of this material, on the affinity of the Qur’an with the Lucan texts. We might well have already been led to expect this affinity because Mary’s husband (the main actor in the first chapters of Matthew) does not appear at all in the Qur’an. Just as in Luke, the full emphasis in the Qur’an is on Mary the mother of Jesus, with a minor role for Zechariah and his son John (the Baptiser). Räisänen has more than once emphasised that in the Lucan texts the issue of Jesus’ existence before his earthly birth does not arise. There is no pre-existence of the eternally existent *logos*, the eternal Word or Son of God.

Also in the miracle stories in the Acts of the Apostles it is said that it is God who is active through Jesus, not the independent miraculous power of Jesus himself. So Peter preached in Acts 2:22, 'Jesus of Nazareth was a man attested to you by God with power. You know yourselves the mighty deeds, the wonders and signs that *God did through him among you*.' Similar expressions are found in Acts 3:13 and 4:27. Over against those who maintain that Muhammad had heard a kind of Harmony of the Gospels this text suggests that Muhammad had an earlier acquaintance with the text of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. (Räsänen 1971:90-1)

Apart from this there are clear differences between the Qur'an and the Gospel of Luke. They are not concerned with the doctrine of the Trinity, with which Luke's Gospel itself has no point of contact. Rather they are in the idea of Jesus' suffering. For Luke, 'the Messiah-Christ must suffer' (Acts 26:23), while in the Qur'an the suffering of an innocent person is something that will not be carried out by God, as is clearly reflected in sura 4.

51: *God is my Lord and your Lord, so worship him. This is a straight way.* As a summing up of Jesus' teaching we detect here a strong harmonising with the message of Muhammad. Alongside all the differences that we might establish between sura 3 and sura 19, we must observe that this is a verse where we can see a literal resemblance, of even the whole verse (with 19:36). In 5:117 there occurs also a kind of summary of Jesus' teaching, where he addresses God, 'I have said to them only, "Serve God, my Lord and your Lord"'.

52: *Who will be my helpers, for God?* Helpers (*ansār*) is the term generally used for the original inhabitants of Medina who invited Muhammad and who supported him. In this connection we think readily of the apostles, Jesus' helpers. It is also possible that the word used here was selected on account of its similarity to the Arabic and Qur'anic term for Christians, the Nasara (followers of the Nazarene, see Steenbrink 2002)

53: *Write us down as among those who bear witness.* As was mentioned in the introductory chapter, the Arabic word for

‘witness’ also means ‘martyr’. So, here the preparedness of the apostles (or later the Medina helpers of Muhammad) for their suffering to the point of death is intended.

54: *They make plans and God makes plans.* In verse 49 it was explicitly stated that Jesus was sent to the Israelites. Also, as this passage is not as sharply anti-Jewish as 4:153-162, the Jews play a substantial role here. We might conclude that here and in sura 4:153-159 the supposition is that the Jews wanted to kill Jesus, but they were not successful. In general sura 3 is not outspokenly anti-Jewish as sura 4. Here another theme sounds through, namely reference to Muhammad’s own death-threat and the deliverance from it.

This verse anticipates in its entirety the somewhat longer formulated 8:30, ‘and at that time they who are unbelieving made plans to hold you in bonds, or to kill you or to drive you out. They make plans and God makes plans but God is the best plan-maker.’ ‘They who are the unbelieving’ in sura 8 must undoubtedly be understood as a large portion of the inhabitants of Mecca in August 622, when already a large number of Muhammad’s followers had panicked and were on the way to Yathrib (quickly thereafter renamed Medina) on the invitation of several parties of that place. In this way the plot to kill Muhammad originated.

According to the classic account of Muhammad’s life by Ibn Ishaq the devil himself was present at the gathering of the elders of the Quraish tribe to which Muhammad himself belonged. Present in the form of a dignified grey-haired man dressed in a rough mantel and under the pretext that he was a worthy man and fellow tribesman who had come from the interior, the Najd, he suggested that Muhammad be taken prisoner, the door locked and that he be left to starve to death as had been done in earlier times with individual censured poets. In this way no direct murder was committed, and it was hoped therefore that no blood feud would follow. In this we see another legendary figure, Abu Jahl (literally ‘Little Father Blockhead’), who formed a representative cooperation out of all the clans of the tribe to bring about the murder of Muhammad. In this way too it was

hoped to ensure that no blood feud would follow, because all parts of the tribe were involved.

But the angel Gabriel warned Muhammad that he must sleep somewhere else, and let his nephew Ali lie on his bed. When the assailants came to the prophet's house, he went outside and scattered stuff over the heads of his assailants so that they could not see him because God had taken away their visual faculties, as is stated in Qur'an 36:9, 'We have covered them with the veil, so that they cannot see.' Muhammad in this way could leave the house unseen. He came upon someone who was not a member of the group planning his killing. This man came by Muhammad's house later on and said to the assailants that he had seen Muhammad going out in another direction. On this those pledged to make the attempt on Muhammad's life felt he had laid the stuff over their heads. They went into the house and saw Ali lying on the bed enveloped in Muhammad's green mantel. They did not waken him but watched until the morning when they saw that it was Ali. Having reference to this God revealed Qur'an 8:30, 'and at that time they who are unbelieving made plans to hold you in bonds, or to kill you or to drive you out. They make plans and God makes plans but God is the best plan-maker.' Following the oldest remaining writings on Muhammad's life this verse 8:30 refers to an event in the process of the migration to Medina. This interpretation however is not compelling. The distinguished German Qur'anic scholar Rudi Paret suggests that it may refer to the boycott of Muhammad by his tribe, some years earlier.¹¹

Within the framework of these references we can readily seek a parallel between the life histories of Muhammad himself and of Jesus. Both were rescued from a serious threat of death, Muhammad at the moment he hoped to depart for Medina, Jesus at the time the Jews would put him to death on a cross (although this was not said explicitly here). Perhaps we may see the helpers (*ansār*) of 3:52 and 3:56 in the same light. For Muhammad these were the inhabitants of Medina, for Jesus they were the Nasara, the Christians. But we must remain cautious: such interpretations are still subject of discussion.

¹¹ Guillaume, 1955:223; Paret, 1971:187.

55: *At that time God said: 'Jesus, I let you die'.* The expression 'at that time' (Arabic *idz*) is often the introduction to a new passage, but here it is rather a connection within a passage. In sura 19:33 Jesus' death was spoken of in very general terms, in similar words to the account of John's death, like the refrain of a hymn with strophes. Just as an end came to the beautiful life of John, so there was also a blessed end to that of Jesus: 'Peace is with me on the day that I die.' In sura 4:157 on the other hand the killing and thus the success of the crucifixion is directly denied. Here and in 5:117 a seeming death and exaltation is spoken of.

How must we understand the saying here, 'I let you die' (Arabic *mutawaffika*)? The verb is repeated, once with relation to Jesus in 5:117. In both places it is also translated as 'I will take you up' (Yusuf Ali). Quite important in an interpretation where the Qur'an is seen as a whole is a comparison with the two parallel places in the Qur'an where the same verb is used in another context. These places speak of death as caused by divine operation, possibly by means of the angels. This is the case in 4:97, 'When they are taken by the angels' (spoken of the good combatants who fell in battle) and 6:61, (God sent guardians, protectors for humankind, so that) 'whenever death comes to one of you, our messengers take him'. Reading the text together with these parallel passages we may conclude for the text of sura 3:55 that a true death of Jesus may be combined with a glorification and elevation. It was not humans who killed, but utterly it was God who took him away.

The common Qur'an commentaries link these texts with 4:157 where it is explicitly stated that the Jews had not killed Jesus or crucified him, but another in his place. We will discuss this further in the following chapter. Here it is only the question: must we interpret this text of sura 4 against the background of the rather careless mention of Jesus' death in 19:33 and against the speaking of death as an elevation in 3:55, or must we, as also occurs in modern studies of the New Testament, examine each particular text on its own merits? It is certainly reasonable to do that, because in this way a history of the development of the Qur'an can explicitly be made and the understanding of each of these texts as a separate message can be stressed. We will return to that below, in the conclusion.

58: *That is the message we read out to you concerning the signs and the warning of wisdom.* This solemn formula appears to be the end of the Jesus passage. ‘Message’ represents the word *zīkr*, which in sura 19 some see as ‘being mentioned, spoken revelation’.

59: *For God Jesus is like Adam.* After verse 58, which we may view as a conclusion to this long Jesus passage, verse 59 may be understood as an addition. Jesus as the new Adam is a familiar notion in Christendom, which here however, like so many ideas and qualifications about Jesus, has not been worked out in Islam. The emphasis lies in the special creative power of God.

In the middle of the remaining considerations of the first section of this sura we still find a short mention of Jesus in 3:84.

84: Say: we believe in God and in what has been sent down upon us
and in what has been sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes,
and in what is given to Moses, Jesus and the prophets through the Lord.
We make no distinction between them
and to Him we have surrendered.

84: This verse is almost wholly identical with 2:136, with three very slight differences. 1° at the beginning it states here ‘say’, while in 2:136 there is a rather unusual plural, ‘say ye’. 2° The preposition ‘upon us’ is different in wording, but interchangeable in meaning; 3° In 2:136 ‘was given’ is repeated after ‘Moses and Jesus’. These differences are so small as to be negligible. It does not occur frequently that such a long verse appears twice in almost identical form in the Qur’an. The context, in both cases, is clearly different.

Conclusion

Sura 3 presents the longest and fullest passage concerning Jesus in the Qur'an. In comparison with the other long narrative passage, sura 19, there occur a number of high titles for Jesus, such as Word of God and Messiah although these are not further elaborated. To the narrative text of sura 19:16-33 a polemical section is added (19: 34-40), which is absent entirely from this third sura. There is no polemic here concerning the fact that God himself has no child, nor any reference to the understanding of God in three persons. The passage concerning Jesus' death and exaltation has an emphasis on God's almighty power, 'He has the best plans', while the foes remain all but anonymous and nameless.

There still remain a number of important questions. First of all concerning the sources and context of this sura. Must we seek the sources in an older Christian Jesus hymn, taken up as an exemplar by Arab Christians from Najran or northern regions, or must we see this text as a reflection of discussions with individual believers or groups of Christians from diverse regions, such as Yemen (Najran), Abyssinia, North Arabia and Syria, Egypt or possibly Persia?

Then there is the question of interpretation: the polemic aspect is wholly absent here. On the other hand the text is much more detailed elaborated than that in the Meccan sura. Here it speaks not only of the miraculous birth of Jesus but also of his attributes, his appearance and ultimate end, and also of God's glorious victory over the craftiness of his enemies and through that of Jesus' exaltation. Jesus is not represented to Arabs and Muslims as Abraham is, of whom it is said in verse 3:67: 'Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian' (*Nasraniya*). It was also said of Abraham in verse 65 that he was before the Torah and the Gospel. In this sura Jesus is seen as a brother prophet for another people. He continues as a witness to the very same God. The narrative section concerning Jesus merges in the end into an affirmation of the prophethood of Muhammad in 3:81: 'When God made a covenant with the prophets: "See What kind of book and wisdom I also gave you, and after that a Messenger came confirming what you have, believe in him and help him"'.

Saved from the cross; no trinity

Sura 4: 153-162; 171-172

Sura 4 is called *an-nisā*, the women, because the first part of this text contains a number of regulations concerning the relationship between men and women, or more specifically concerning women themselves (1-43). These texts fit within a movement that gave rise to a number of concrete questions with regard to the regulation of practical issues. The best known is certainly the passage 4:2-6 in which, wholly in the style of the social message of the Qur'an, it was stipulated that widows and orphans must receive their just care and attention. It was possible that a man might marry two, three or even four women, clearly with the purpose that each with her children should be cared for. 'But if you fear that you will not be able to deal justly, then only one' (4:3). The women's movement in modern Islam has, based on this provision, drawn the conclusion that the Qur'an actually advocates monogamous marriage, for humanly speaking one can never give love fairly to more than one wife.

Also a typically feminist interpretation is taken of verse 4:1. There it is stated: 'O mankind, fear your Lord who created you from a single *nafs*, and who out of her created her partner'. *Nafs* (like the Hebrew *nephesh* for the 'breath' by means of which God breathed life into the first human) is feminine, but the traditional interpretation renders it as 'the soul' and particularly of Adam, so that Mawdudi in following the majority Islamic tradition translated: '...who created you out from a single being, and out of it created its mate'. Other translations even translate it in a male form. Yusuf Ali reads: 'Who created you from a single person, created of like nature his mate'. The Pakistani scholar Riffat Hassan and the Black American convert scholar Amina Wadud have, more than once, sharply criticised this displacing of a feminine with a masculine or neuter form. God's original creation is presented in the Qur'an as an undifferentiated human being, in terms of grammar having a feminine form. Then, out of that being man and woman simultaneously came into being. (Wadud 1999:19-23)

From this discussion of verses 1 and 2-6 alone it is clear that the regulations for the new religious community embody

much more than strict legal provisions alone. Apart from that there appear also in this sura numerous polemical passages. Sura 4:44-104 is a judgement against a group who were continually described as dissemblers, hypocrites. The most obvious were those among the old inhabitants of Medina who could not work wholeheartedly with Muhammad and particularly would not follow him in the physical struggle of the young Muslim community with their old opponents from Mecca. Verses 4:153-175 is a strong passage against 'people of the book', by which we should understand the Jews of Medina. They are condemned for everything, all that we already know from the old Jewish prophets and also from Jesus: from the story of the Golden Calf to the killing of the prophets. They were also condemned because they wanted to see Jesus killed, and boasted that they had accomplished that. God however had 'taken Jesus on high'. In verses 171-172 we find the argument against the 'people of the book' given a quite different slant. There a clear rejection of the doctrine that God should be 'three' appears (the other verses against the trinity are 5:72-73 and 5:116). After that the sura ends with three verses of universal authority, extending to all people. Verse 174 is an affirmation of the revelation given through Muhammad. Verse 175 follows with a promise to those who believe in God: 'He shall guide them in His mercy and grace to Himself along a right way.' That seems a beautiful conclusion. The final verse 176 seems then to be a kind of addition concerning questions of inheritance, which were also addressed at the beginning of the sura. Richard Bell speaks here of a modification of verse 15.

The Jews are accused of boasting over the crucifixion of Jesus

153 The people of the book ask you that you send them a book from heaven. They have asked Moses for something still worse. They said: 'Let us see God in full public view'. Then the thunderclap took hold of them on account of their lawlessness.

Then they took the calf, after the clear proofs had reached them; but that We forgave them and We gave a clear authorisation to Moses.

154 We raised the mount over them because of the covenant with them. We said to them: Enter the gateway reverently bowing. We said: Commit no transgressions in the matter of the Sabbath. And We entered into a strong covenant with them.

155 But because of the breaking of their covenant, their unbelief in God's signs, their killing of the prophets without any justification, and their saying: Our hearts are uncircumcised. Well no: God has sealed them in their unbelief, how little they believe.

156 And because of their unbelief, their violent slander against Mary,

157 they said: We have put to death the *messiah* Jesus, the son of Mary. They have not killed him. And they have not crucified him but it was made to appear so to them. Those who differ in this matter are in doubt. They have no knowledge –but only conjecture to rely on. They have of a surety not killed him.

158 Nevertheless God has raised him up to Himself. God is mighty and wise.

159 There is no one from the people of the book who shall not before his death believe in him and on the day of resurrection he will be a witness concerning them.

153-154: *They have asked Moses for something even worse.* This passage follows the most important stages of Moses' experience, as has also been recounted in sura 2 in much more detail.

157: *They have not killed him...it was made to appear so to them.* Many commentators deduce from this that the crucifixion planned by the Jews miscarried in that the body of another person was placed on the cross. This body was made to appear exactly like the body of Jesus. This person was thought to have been Judas, Pilate or Simon of Cyrene. People are uncertain about what precisely happened to Jesus. According to the majority of commentators he was taken up alive on high to God and he keeps watch there now until shortly he will return at the end of the times to engage in the battle with *Dajjāl* 'the antichrist', to bring his followers to the true religion, the Islam

of Muhammad, to found a kingdom of peace and prosperity, and finally after that to die as ordinary people die and to be raised up on the day of judgement.

There are no Qur'anic texts concerning what happened to Jesus after he was raised on high from the cross. On this subject there are extant a number of sayings (*hadith*) attributed to the prophet Muhammad, the most authentic sometimes contradicting each other, so that the end of Jesus' life is rather uncertain. The Ahmadi Muslims claim to have conclusive evidence that Jesus was brought to Kashmir where he worked and died at the blessed age of 120 years. They can however give no detail concerning the time when Jesus was brought there. There is more on this in the commentary on sura 23:50-1. For the majority of Muslims this is not an important issue. People may perhaps find a similarity with the religious conviction of Christians concerning the death or 'passing away' of Mary. There are numerous artistic portrayals of an aged Mary dying surrounded by the apostles. Furthermore, since the Middle Ages there have also been depictions of Mary raised to heaven. On 1 November 1950 Pope Pius XII declared as dogma that 'the perpetually virgin Mary after the completion of her earthly life was taken up body and soul into the heavenly glory'. I had myself as a child an image of Mary seated on a many-legged chair in an enormous banqueting hall that was great and beautiful. She and Jesus sat alone there: what were they doing? The majority of Christians, myself included, even though officially faithful Catholics, are not able to make any proposals in this matter which, in any case, has not become a central point in the Christian confession of faith. In ecumenical discussions with Protestants for example it plays scarcely any role. Similarly there are no militant opponents of this doctrine. So perhaps we need to adopt the attitude of middle-of-the-road Muslims with respect to these verses. For them Jesus was not put to death on the cross by the Jews. Something else happened, he was saved, exalted, but what took place after that, or what shall take place between then and the end of the times, is rather uncertain.

We must certainly not interpret this passage as a direct attack on the crucifixion and its salvific value. That would fall wholly outside the perspective of an Islamic confession. As there is no original sin so there is no particular event by means

of which it can be done away with. Muslims know the value of offerings for atonement and thanksgiving. One of the two greatest festivals is called the Feast of Offering (Idul Adha), in which the offering of Abraham is commemorated, but that has no general or cosmic significance.

The denial of Jesus' death on the cross has a long history, recorded long before the time of Muhammad. Irenaeus of Lyons, born around 140 on the 'Greek' west coast of present-day Turkey, and who became a bishop in southern France around 178, wrote in his great work *Adversus Haereses* about adherents of a Christian Gnostic sect, who denied Christ's crucifixion. This idea was taken up by the Manicheans and found wide dissemination throughout eastern Christendom, especially among the Monophysites, who rejected the 'two-nature doctrine' of the Council of Chalcedon (451) and attributed only one nature, the divine, to Christ. For that reason, the humanity of Jesus was denied or came to be seen as an altogether unsubstantial covering. Some have considered that the brief term of Mary's pregnancy, which people conclude from sura 19:19-21, is a Monophysite remnant. Also the denial of the crucifixion in the Qur'an could have arisen from such a Monophysite, Christian influence. The Christians of Najrān were certainly in part of Jacobite or Syrian-Monophysite origin. On the other hand we find in the Qur'an also a more Nestorian influence, in which Jesus was regarded as entirely human. The Nestorians were rejecting the expression, Mary, Mother of God, from the Council of Ephesus (431). The emphasis on Jesus as an exalted prophet, and more especially as a man like any other, could also show a Nestorian influence. Apart from that the division between these two principal currents is still based on a very approximate classification. Local currents offered still further variations, or in the words quoted above of an early church father: *Arabia ferax haereseon*, Arabia is a hotbed of heresies (for further discussion of the denial of the crucifixion see the introductory chapter concerning Christians in the locality of Muhammad).

Up to now we have discussed historical ideas that can make the rejection of the crucifixion comprehensible, or strengthen it. The problem of sura 4:157-158 still persists, with the rejection of the

killing of Jesus by the Jews. In general the three other references to Jesus' death in 3:55, 5:117 and 19:33 all suggest a 'regular death' and represent a reconsideration of the reference to a rejection in 4:157. Should we not consider this matter the other way about? Thus might we consider 4:157 not as an absolute rejection of the death of Jesus on the cross, but only as a rejection of a specific understanding of it? The Dutch scholar Anton Wessels has written that the passage 4:153-159 taken as a whole is an indictment against the Jews of Medina. They boasted that their people had put Jesus to death. This was rejected in the Qur'an, in the same way that in 8:17 a group of Muslims was corrected when they boasted after their first victory, at the battle of Badr, that they had been able to kill a great number of their enemies. The text of sura 8:17 explicitly says: 'You have not killed them, I [God] have killed them'. Wessels notes,

People must not read this text as a denial that the Muslims killed Muhammad's opponents. What was emphatically denied was that Muhammad and his followers could make claim to the victory: it is God who had brought this about. Thus the text does not reject an actual event, but rejects the mistaken interpretation that could be given to this event. (Wessels 2001:199)

So we should be able to read verse 157 also as a denial of what the Jews claimed, that they were able to bring about the death of Jesus. God had himself willed the death and permitted it. We do not (yet) find this interpretation taken up by Muslims. So we must realise that this interpretation will certainly not yet help us to eliminate the problem. There remains the long tradition of the denial of the crucifixion, which was extant among some groups of Christians before the coming of Islam in the region, and even more among 'outsiders' like the Manichaeans, and which moreover was strengthened through a long Islamic tradition. The last interpretation is still possible from a precise reading of the text, but would not be compelling. Other viewpoints (such for example as the general acceptance of the fact of the crucifixion by secular, non-Christian historians such as Flavius Josephus, and the initial despair and desperation of Jesus' disciples) might

also play a role in the reinterpretation of this verse in discussions between Muslims and Christians.

159: *There is no one from the people of the book who shall not before his death believe in him.* We might well read this verse in the light of a problem such as that in Romans 9-11, where Paul asks himself why the Jewish people do not accept Jesus as Christ, the Messiah. A possible solution suggested by Paul is that first the non-Jews will accept the message of Jesus. The Jews shall remain hardened until 'the whole Gentile world has come in and then shall all Israel be saved' (Rom. 11:25-26). Thus we must read here the reassuring prophecy that the Jews (against whom this passage is aimed in the first instance) will nevertheless eventually also accept the truth concerning Jesus. *Before his death* is according to many commentators a reference to the death of Jesus, which shall take place following Jesus' return to earth. According to others it refers to the individual departed members of the Jewish religion who claimed to have killed Jesus. Sayyid Qutb supports the latter interpretation:

The Jews who have rejected Jesus and continue to deny his status, and on the contrary claim that they put him to death by crucifixion, shall have an experience that tells them that Jesus really was God's messenger and that his message was the truth. Then they will believe in Jesus, but it will be too late for their belief to be of any use to them. On the day of judgement Jesus will give witness against them. (Qutb 1999: Vol 3:380)

163 We have revealed to you
just as we have revealed to Noah and the prophets after
him.

And we have revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac,
Jacob, and the tribes,
Jesus, Job, Aaron, Solomon
And we have given a *zabur* to David.

171 People of the book!
Do not go too far in your religion
Or say of God anything but the truth.

The Messiah Jesus, the son of Mary, is God's messenger
 And his word that he directed to Mary
 And a spirit from him.
 Believe then in God and do not say: three.
 Desist from that. It is better for you.
 God is one God, Praise Him!
 That he should have a child!
 To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on the
 earth.
 God is sufficient as guardian.
 172. The Messiah does not disdain to be a servant of
 God,
 nor do the angels who are brought close to Him.
 Those who disdain to serve him and are arrogant
 -He will gather them all to himself.

These verses at the end of the long fourth sura appear as the
 tangled, loose remarks at the end of a sermon, by way of a
 summing up of the basic elements of its content. *Zabur* in verse
 163 points to the Psalms. So also in 21:105, referring to Psalm
 37:29, *The righteous shall inherit the earth*.

In verse 171 surely we must understand the address to
 'the people of the book' to refer to the Christians. In many other
 cases it refers to the Jews, but paying regard to the context the
 Christians are more in view here. Or must we draw no
 differentiation here, with Muhammad making a point here also
 with the Jewish-Christians, Jewish believers in Jesus or some
 sect that is difficult to classify? In this verse two key titles for
 Jesus appear, just as we found also in 3:45, namely Word from
 God and Messiah. The naming of Jesus as Spirit from God (also
 in 19:17, 21:91 and 66:12) is new here. This title is not
 developed here, whereas in the latter two passages it was said
 that 'We blew in there some of Our Spirit', which is often
 interpreted in the commentaries as indicating that the angel
 Gabriel had blown, if indirectly, into a mantle which Mary then
 put on, at which her active pregnancy began. The extensive
 teaching about Jesus, which in Christian theology was often
 associated with titles such as Word of God, Spirit and Messiah,
 is absent from most Islamic theology. We should not give a
 'high' interpretation in either case, for the purpose of this verse

is simply that the oneness of God and the boundary between God and humankind, including Jesus, might be established.

We come up against the denial of a doctrine of three concerning God again in 5:73 (also expressed in general terms), while in 5:116 there is a more precise denial of a tri-unity of God, Jesus and Mary. This will be discussed more fully, and the rejection of the possibility of a God who has a son we will also discuss more fully, in considering sura 19:34-40. This series of corrections with respect to the Christians in verse 171 is thus a summing up of motifs that appear elsewhere in the Qur'an, where they are worked out more strongly and more broadly. The conclusion in verse 172 that Jesus is a servant has stronger emphasis than the other references to Jesus as servant of God (in 19:30 and 43:59). Besides the title messenger (*rasul*) that of a servant (*abd*) is clearly the most important designation that was attributed to Muhammad and the other prophets, as well as to Jesus, in the Qur'an (for Muhammad see 18:1, Zechariah in 19:2, Job in 38:41). In the shortest version of the profession of faith it is declared: 'I believe that there is no god but God, and I believe that Muhammad is his messenger.' However in the longer version Muhammad is named both as messenger and as 'his servant' (*abduhu*).

There is here a linguistic affinity with the Hebrew *ebed* that was applied to Jesus, but there is no indication that we find here an application of the biblical notion of God's suffering servant.¹² As so often happens with biblical terminology in the Qur'an it occurs in a different context and so we may not cross over too quickly from one scripture to the other. There is thus little interest in a 'joint confession of faith' by Muslims and Christians in Jesus and Muhammad as God's servants.

In sura 5:73, 75 and 77 we see a repetition of the most important texts of 4:171 and so we can see these texts as a kind of reiteration or later commentary on this text. It cannot now be decided whether sura 4 was really earlier or later than sura 5. Both are seen as revelations from the last years of Muhammad's prophetic career. On this refer to sura 5.

¹² We do not find reference to Jesus as God's suffering servant in the gospels, but rather in Acts, e.g. 3:13, and particularly 8:32-33 where Isaiah 53:7-8, one of the songs of the suffering servant of Yahweh is applied to Jesus. Cullmann 1959:69-82.

God's servant who received the Gospel

Sura 5:17-18, 46, 72-79, 110-120

Sura 5 is often regarded as the last of the Medina suras, dotting the i's, or indeed a kind of final statement from Muhammad. The idea of a parting word or testament is especially to be found in sura 5:3, 'This day I have brought your religion to completion for you, My favour to you is shown completely and Islam, surrender to God, I have approved as the religion for you.' For 'I' here we may read firstly God, but we might also insert Muhammad. This text appears midway in a listing of forbidden foods (what has died of itself, flesh of animals over which some name other than God was invoked, or which had been strangled).

The whole fifth sura is a collage of practical prescriptions and polemical elements, in which Judaism is portrayed negatively in comparison with Christianity. This is put forward most sharply in 5:82, 'You shall observe that the men who are most hostile against those who believe are the Jews and the followers of polytheism. And you shall observe that those who stand closest in affection with those who believe are those who say: "we are Christians". This is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant'. Nevertheless it is not the Jews alone who are rejected in this sura. Alongside this praise for the Christians in 5:82 there is a sharp critique of them, among other things in a comment on the Christians' view of Jesus. A recent study of this subject speaks of a *Summa contra Christianos* (Risse 1989). The self-assertion of a new faith community, different and marked off from Jews and Christians, speaks very plainly in the terse verses of sura 5.

17. Unbelievers are those who say: God is the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary.

Say: Who could do anything against God, if He should will that the Messiah Jesus, the son of Mary with his

mother and all who are upon the earth should be brought to an end?

To God belongs dominion over the heavens and the earth and what is between them.

He creates what He will. God is almighty.

18. The Jews and the Christians say: We are God's children and his beloved.

Say: Why then does he punish you for your sins?

But no, you are humans, who belong to those He has created.

He forgives those He will, and he punishes those He will.

To God belongs dominion over the heavens and the earth and what is between them.

With him is the destiny of all.

This is clearly again a fragment of a polemic whereby the voices of various parties themselves can be reconstructed with a great level of probability. That has been attempted also below. With the rapid change of the person speaking the little word 'say' (Arabic: *Qul*) appears twice so that the hearer/reader might recall that the most important person speaking here is God. Or was this a hyper-orthodox final editor, who found that a certain form had to be presented so that the complete Qur'an is God's revelation and for this reason this word has been inserted 570 times in the final text of the Qur'an? Even if in a perspective of faith you can hear God's word in this, at the same time a terse debate between Muhammad and the Christians sounds through it!

God/Muhammad: *Unbelievers are those who say:*

Christians: *God is the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary.*

God: *Say:*

Muhammad: *Who could do anything against God, if He should will that the Messiah Jesus, the son of Mary with his mother and all who are upon the earth should be brought to an end?*

To God belongs dominion over the heavens and the earth and what is between them. He creates what He will. God is almighty.

The Jews and the Christians say: *We are God's children and his beloved.*

God: *Say:*

Muhammad: *Why then does he punish you for your sins?*

But no, you are humans, who belong to those He has created.

He forgives those He will, and he punishes those He will.

To God belongs dominion over the heavens and the earth and what is between them.

With him is the destiny (of all)

In the first debate an oblique argument as it were is advanced against the divinity of Jesus (also named Masih/Messiah, a title of honour that is not more fully expanded here). God could allow him and his mother to come to an end! In the framework of the whole question about Jesus and about his not being put to death on the cross this is a quite peculiar observation. God could thus destroy Jesus. It looks as if even his-not-being-put-to-death-on-the-cross does not come into play. God could let Jesus' life come to an end in the usual way, as with other people, together with his mother and with the whole earth. Here the verb *wafa* ' is not used (as it is in 3:55 and here later in 5:117), but the much more harsh *yuhlika*. It appears tens of times writing of God as punisher. For example in 19:98, 'But how many generations before their time have we already destroyed?' Is this a reference to something like the story of Noah? It appears almost always in a sharply negative sense. So also by way of example in 11:117, 'Your Lord is not such as would wrongfully destroy human habitations while their inhabitants are righteous'. Very frequently God is the subject who acts in these verses about destroying. In many cases they are linked with witness to his great power. God can do this, and no other. The emphasis seems to be on this power, not on death. Clearly a subordination of Jesus to God is described, that is not further elaborated. As ever, we read a fragment of a debate in which the short arguments are gone over again, but of which naturally we here hear only the side of the Muslims. Jesus was twice named 'the son of Mary', perhaps somewhat disparagingly, or seen differently it can be understood as an emphasis on his humanness.

The second debate, in verse 18, no longer addresses the person of Jesus and his disputed divinity directly. Here the claim

of the Jews and the Christians that they are called ‘children of God and his beloved’ is addressed. For the term ‘God’s children’ a word was used (*ibn*, plural *abnau*) other than the expression used for the denial of Jesus as ‘child of God’ where the word *walad* for child was used. Certainly Deuteronomy 14:1 says, ‘Yahweh your God regards you as his sons’. Beside this there is Exodus 4:22-23 (‘Israel is my firstborn son’) and Jeremiah 31:19 (‘I am always Israel’s father, and Ephraim is my firstborn’) but for all that this designation generally is not customary among Jews.¹³ Thus we can ask ourselves whether a customary term such as ‘children of God and beloved’ was known among the Jews. Even more, the debate that followed after that is a very understandable polemic, whereby it was supposed that Jews and Christians also die, as a result of God’s punishment or for more general reasons.

46. And we have sent Jesus the son of Mary to follow in
 their footsteps
 as one who confirms all that was in the Torah before his
 time
 We have given him the Gospel with a guide within it
 And a light for the confirming of all that was in the
 Torah before his time
 And as a guide and stimulus for the godfearers.

This verse appears within a long passage in which the scriptures for Jews and Christians were discussed. Verses 44-45 discuss the Torah and in this way verse 45 repeats amply the strong provision of the Torah concerning retribution: ‘life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, and tooth for tooth; and also for wounding there is requital. If anyone as an act of charity remits the retaliation, that shall be an act of atonement for him.’ This passage ends with ‘whoever does not pass judgement according to what God has sent down they are wrong doers.’ This last sentence was repeated literally in 5:47 where it is applied to Christians and the Gospel. In verse 44, in keeping

¹³ The Deuteronomy text was cited by the Jewish Speyer 1931:443. The two other references appear in the commentary of the well-known Jewish convert to Islam, Leopold Weiss (1900-1992), later Muhammad Asad in his great commentary, *The Message of the Qur’an*, p 145.

with a Jewish usage, the Torah is named 'light' (see also Proverbs 6:23 and Psalm 119:105; it is a well-known Rabbinic usage that where 'light' appears throughout the Hebrew Bible we may read 'Torah').

Verse 46 places Jesus without more ado in the lineage of the Torah; the Gospel was also named light. We find a similar confirmation formula in 61:6. In 3:50 it was also made clear that Jesus came as a confirmation of the Torah, but there, by way of addition, it was also said that he came in order that 'some of what had been forbidden to you was to be permitted'.

72. Unbelievers are those who say: God is the Messiah,
the son of Mary.

But the Messiah has said: O Israelites, worship God, my
Lord and your Lord.

Whoever joins a companion with God,

God will deny him the garden;

His abode is the fire.

Those who do wrong will have no helpers.

73. Unbelievers are those who say that God is a third of
three.

But there is no other god than one God.

And if they do not desist from what they are saying,

Then shall a painful punishment strike those among them
who are unbelievers.

74. Why then do they not turn and make a full
repentance toward God and ask forgiveness from him?

God is forgiving and merciful.

75. The Messiah, the son of Mary, is no more than a
messenger

and like the other messengers who went before him

and his mother was an upright woman;

they both ate their food.

See how we make clear signs for them

And see how they were distracted.

76. Say: Will you worship in the place of God something
that has no power to harm or benefit you?

God is the one who hears, the one who knows.

77. Say: People of the book!

Do not go too far in your religion, beyond the truth.

And do not follow the inclinations of people who formerly went wrong.

And have misled many and have gone astray from the right path.

78. The Israelites who were unbelievers were anathematised by the mouth of David and Jesus, the son of Mary.

That was because they were rebellious and hostile.

79. They did not keep each other from the objectionable things that they did.

What they did was evil indeed.

This is a long philippic against the Christians on account of their teaching about the incarnation of the godhead in the Messiah Jesus, and against the trinity. Its beginning is identical with the earlier text in this sura, where we read also in 5:17 'Unbelievers are those who say: God is the Messiah, the son of Mary.' As to content and design these verses appear sharply similar to 4:171-172, also a powerful repudiation of the 'three'. There at the same time is the warning that Jesus did not consider it beneath himself to be God's servant. On this point we think here naturally of Philippians 2:6.

*He who was in godlike majesty
Did not himself wish to clutch hold
Of equality with God:
He has stripped himself
And taken the form of a slave*

Naturally the context is quite different. In Philippians it is about the picture of an eternal *logos*, a personal intermediary between humankind and God, who came down to earth. In the Qur'an it is about a prophet, a man, who although God's messenger nevertheless does not consider himself high but is called God's servant or slave.

We can find these coherent series of pronouncements almost intact in other passages of the Qur'an. Following the tradition of the academic interpretation of scripture these pronouncements must be taken as loose sayings (*logia*) that are

repeated literally several places, which provides in itself a demonstration of the unity of the Qur'an.

5:72. *Unbelievers are those who say: God is the Messiah, the son of Mary.* We find this repeated to the letter in 5:17, earlier in this sura. In the second part the saying of Jesus is repeated, 'Serve God, my Lord and your Lord'; this was also rendered as a word of Jesus in 5:117 and again with somewhat different wording in 3:51, 19:36 and in 43:64. In 36:61 it sounds as a word of God that people must not serve the satan, but 'that you must serve me'. It is like a refrain that according to the Qur'an sums up the core of Jesus' message. To the traditional catechism question, 'for what purpose are we on earth?' the verse 51:56 could readily be cited as a short Islamic summary: 'I have created humankind and the jinn merely to serve me'.

5:73. We also encounter the reproach concerning belief in God as three earlier in 4:171, and more clearly set out in 5:116. What is meant here precisely by, *those among them who are unbelievers*? The text seems to take into account that there is some elasticity or internal differences in the Christian point of view because here the possibility is spoken of that they might 'desist'. Is that a reflection of what we more often read in the Qur'an concerning the different points of view that exist among the Christians? So in view of that are there Christians who do not adhere to a trinitarian doctrine? This possibility has been well discussed among Muslim commentators.

5:74. This verse appears to assume that there is still a possibility that Christians might adhere to a different opinion. It attracts our attention that in the modern commentaries the sturdy debate among the Christians themselves is not taken up in the internal Islamic debates. Just as in the recent book about Jesus by Roger Haight for example the Islamic views are not brought into play, so we hear in the modern Islamic commentaries practically nothing concerning the actual debates within Christendom. In our conclusion we return to this theme.

75. *No more than a messenger... they both ate their food.* This argumentation about Jesus' humanness was partly found

previously, in 4:171. In 3:144 the same was said of Muhammad. That verse concerning Muhammad speaks emphatically of the death of the earlier prophets and alludes to the very probable death of Muhammad. It is said that the Muslims should not be surprised over what might happen: Muhammad is merely a messenger; before his time there were already [other] messengers who passed away. 'When he died or was slain would you turn on your heels?' Muhammad is not greater than Jesus; there he is one on a list of the great ones, the prophets, who all stand in servanthood to the true One, the Most High, God.

76 *Say: Will you worship in the place of God something that has no power to harm or benefit you?* This verse occurs again, with very little changes, in 21:66 and 6:71, but in these cases it is directed generally against the polytheists. In this series of verses it falls somewhat from the flow of the debate, in that it is not directed specifically against the exaggerated glorification of Jesus.

77. This verse also has a direct parallel in 4:171 *People of the book! Do not go too far in your religion.* In this way we can see verses 73-75-77 also as a kind of commentary on 4:171, that only offers correction to the dogma of the Christians. Verse 5:77 gives no concrete content as to the errors and exaggerations of the 'people of the book' that are indicated here in general terms. From the line of argument of the following verse, 5:78, a clear judgement against the Jews, we may read also a repudiation of them. As regards the Christians the repudiation is more often concerning ideas and teaching, while the judgement repudiating the Jews more often relates to conduct.

78-79 These verses are a rebuke to the Jews, attributed here to David and Jesus. For what concerns David the Jewish scholar Heinrich Speyer (1931:383) pointed to Psalm 109, a long imprecation upon the (clearly Jewish) foes of David. He pointed also to Psalm 68:19, which in Ephesians 4:8 is applied to Jesus. Here a reference was made to 'those who will resist you'. Speyer sees in the combining of David and Jesus, brought together in contradiction to the viewpoint of Jewish people, a

proof that Muhammad could have heard these traditions only from Christians and thus not from Jews.

With the last passage that we will discuss from sura 5, verses 110-120, we encounter again, besides repetitions in verse 110, wholly unique material that we cannot, as in verses 72-79, frequently relate to other passages in the Qur'an. The sections between verses 79 and 110 exist mainly as practical directives. Following the establishment of the fact that the Muslims stand closer to the Christians than to the Jews (5:82 discussed briefly above) there appear verses concerning oaths (slips of the tongue are not really blameworthy) prohibition of wine and gambling, concerning hunting (no one hunts while in a dedicated state), concerning rituals and offerings in and around the Ka'ba – thus a reinforcement of the Arabic character of Islam. Then there are further directives concerning single taboos relating to camels and a discussion concerning testamentary witnesses and oaths.

Especially the last section of sura 5 has been described as a *Summa contra Christianos*, a negative final verdict concerning the Christians, as already quoted above (Risse 1989). That seems somewhat exaggerated, though it is consistent with the terse texts against the Christians. We have here three distinct episodes, all three of which begin with the typical introductory formula of the Qur'an: '(and) when', *wa idza*, (in 110, 111 +112 and finally in 116). A polemical tone against the Christians is found only in the third of these three episodes. There it is again emphasised that Jesus and his mother Mary were not gods, but had been called into the service of the one God. The first two divisions of this 'final symphony' are in a more narrative style.

110. When God said: O Jesus, son of Mary,
think on my favour to you and your mother,
when I strengthened you with the holy spirit, so that in
the cradle and as an adult you spoke to the people;
and when I taught you the book of instruction and
wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel;
and when with my permission you made something in
the form of a bird and you blew into it, with my
permission it became a bird;

and you healed those born blind and sufferers from leprosy and when with my permission you brought [out of the grave];
 and when I kept off the Israelites from you
 when you came to them with clear signs
 about which the unbelievers among them said that clearly this was mere sorcery.

Seven times the little word ‘when’ occurs, in one verse. And that is not helplessness on the part of the translator for it appears also, as *idza*, in the Arabic text. As if someone is tripped up over his words: and when..., and when..., and when. A dramatic narrative, written anew in an emotional style. And that is not yet the end, it is more the opening measure for a sequel, such as verses 111 and 112 that again begin with the little word ‘when’. We are still being held in suspense for only in the third episode, by way of verse 116 where a late start has been made with ‘and when’, comes the real feature of these verses, the warning that people must give no exaggerated titles to Jesus and his mother Mary. Moreover they must follow his command, ‘Serve God, my Lord and your Lord’ (in a repetition of the word of Jesus in 5:72).

This verse looks at first reading like a restatement of the important themes of 3:46-49. In sura 5 it is stated as a word of God, in sura 3 partly as a revelation of the angel to Mary, partly as a word of Jesus:

5:110 When God said: O Jesus, son of Mary, think on my favour to you and your mother when I strengthened you with the holy spirit, so that in the cradle and as an adult you spoke to the people;	3:45. <i>Then the angels said: O Mary, God announces to you a word from himself,</i> [2:87. We have given Jesus, the son of Mary clear signs and have strengthened him with the holy spirit]
and when I taught you the book of instruction and wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel	3:46. <i>In the cradle and as an adult shall he speak to people</i> 3:48. <i>And He shall teach him the book, the wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel.</i>
and when with my permission	3:49. <i>And a messenger to the</i>

you made something in the form of a bird and when you blew into it with my permission it became a bird and when those born blind and sufferers from leprosy with my permission you brought [out of the grave]; and when I kept off the Israelites from you, when you came to them with clear signs about which the unbelievers among them said that clearly this was mere sorcery.	<i>Israelites:</i> <i>I have come to you with a sign from your Lord;</i> <i>That I shall create for you out of clay something in the form of a bird, then breathe into it and with God's permission it shall become a bird.</i> <i>Then I shall heal those born blind and sufferers from leprosy, and make the dead alive, with God's permission.</i>
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Thus in fact 5:110 adds not much to what is known from other verses. The other passages are considered to be 'earlier'. The elements that we have not included in the above table are: firstly, 'my favour (*nikmat*) to you': this word was also used in 5:3, the familiar verse that was said to have been the last revelation: 'This day I have perfected your religion for you, completed my favour toward you and Islam, surrender to God, I have approved as your religion.' It appears, with relation to Jesus, as a verb in 43:59, 'He is only a servant whom We have favoured' and in 19:58 as a pronouncement concerning the great prophets of that sura Zechariah, Jesus, Abraham, Moses, Ishmael, and Idris. These are the ones among the prophets on whom God 'has bestowed favour'. Secondly, 'When I held back the Israelites from you' is clearly a reference to God's protection of Jesus at the moment the Jews wished to crucify him. Nowhere else in the Qur'an is there a similarly precise formulation with connection to Jesus. The verb appears also in 5:11 where it transfers attention to God's protection of the believers (clearly referring to the time of Muhammad): 'When certain people plotted to stretch out their hands against you, upon which He held back their hands from you'. Thirdly the reproach that the miracles of Jesus were mere sorcery. This is also alleged in 61:6. We mention all these parallels here to emphasise the internal consistency of the Qur'an. From another

perspective we may reflect that the preferred justification of modern Muslims is to 'explain the Qur'an by reference to the Qur'an'. External texts should not be given equal standing in the explanation of the Qur'an (for example equating the understanding of 'spirit' in the Qur'an with that in the Christian scriptures) but the internal comparison of different sections of the Qur'an must be the most important tool for exegesis.

A three-sided discussion: God, Jesus and apostles concerning the table miracle

111. And when I disclosed to the disciples:
'Believe in Me and my messenger'.
They said: 'We believe! Bear witness that we have
surrendered ourselves [to God].'
112. When the disciples said: 'Jesus, son of Mary, can
your Lord send down a table to us out of heaven?'
He said: 'Fear God, if you are believers.'
113. They said: 'We desire only to eat and that our hearts
are reassured,
and that we know that you have spoken the truth
and that we belong to those who are witness to it.'
114. Jesus the son of Mary said: 'O God, our Lord, send
a table to us out of heaven that shall be a feast for us,
for the first of us and for the last of us and a sign from
You.
And provide for our sustenance;
You are the best provider.'
115. God said: 'I allow it to come down to you.
If after that there is yet an unbeliever
I will punish that one with a punishment such as I have
visited on none of those who dwell in the world.'

This is a discussion between three parties: God, Jesus and the apostles or disciples as the inner circle of those learning from Jesus are called. The persons speaking are clearly indicated and there need be to be no doubt about the division of the text, although Arabic knows no capital letters or punctuation marks, and therefore there are no quotation marks at all.

Seeking precise elucidation can still produce problems. There are expositors who pointed to a connection between this passage and the story in Acts 10, where the Roman officer and proselyte to Judaism, Cornelius, received the charge to seek further instruction from the apostle Peter. Peter saw a vision of a set table with all kinds of unclean food, that he must slaughter and eat, at the same time hearing a voice: 'Do not consider as unholy what God has declare clean'

A second interpretation sees in the table an association with the institution of the Eucharist, on the evening before Jesus would be taken prisoner and handed over to be executed. Verse 115 should itself be read after the manner of 1 Corinthians 11:27, 'Whoever eats the bread unworthily...makes himself answerable' (so Paret 1971:133).

The third and more generally accepted interpretation is connected with the miracle of the multiplication of the bread and fish, as recounted in John 6:1-35, and also recorded in the three synoptic gospels. This account begins in 5:111-112 with the disciples who must believe in Jesus but still doubt, and because of that they request a miraculous repast as a confirmation of Jesus' message. We come upon this situation regularly in the Qur'an in the context of the doubts of the unbelievers with regard to the prophets (read: with regard to Muhammad) and their request for a miracle. Jesus prayed to God for the miracle whereupon God answered in the way one might respond to children, who keep harping on asking for something in the manner, 'Now, go ahead then. Here you have your miracle. But now if you do not believe, expect a severe punishment!'

A dialogue between God and Jesus concerning the precise function of Jesus and his role at the end of the times

116. And when God said: 'O Jesus, son of Mary, have you said to people:

Take me and my mother as gods beside God?

He will say: 'May you be praised! It was not fit for me to say anything about which I have no right.

Had I said such a thing you would have known it.

You know what is in my innermost being, though I do not know what is in your innermost being.

You are the one who knows the hidden things.
 117. I have said to them only what You have commanded me to say:
 Serve God, my Lord and your Lord, and I was a witness to them so long as I was among them.
 And when You had taken me away you were the watcher over them;
 You are a witness concerning all things.
 118. If you punish them then they are your servants and if you forgive them then you are the mighty one, the wise one.'
 119. God will say: 'This is the day on which the sincere will profit from their sincerity.
 For them are gardens, beneath which rivers flow,
 There they shall dwell for ever and ever.'
 God is pleased with them, and they are pleased with Him.
 That is the mighty triumph!
 120. God has the dominion over the heavens and the earth and what is between them.
 He is almighty.

116. *And when* is the familiar transition formula between two 'paragraphs' as we have so often seen. Muslim commentators will see readily in this passage indicators signifying the future times, so that this discourse between Jesus and God would have taken place in the interval between Jesus' being taken up from the cross and his return, thus in the period in which he had for a time a dwelling in heaven. Jesus denies here the excessive pronouncements that the Christians who followed him formulated.

116. *Me and my mother as gods next to God?* Earlier in this sura, in 5:75, there was also an indication of the idea of three gods or three-in-god, consisting of God, Jesus and Mary. Also 4:171 rejects the idea of 'three', without further elaboration.

117. *Taken away* (Arabic: *Tawaffaitanī*). We have written fully on this verb in connection with verse 3:55, where a different form of the same verb was used. This has given rise to an unceasing debate concerning the fate of Jesus at the cross, or the

claim that he had not died, on the cross or afterwards. We find a special interpretation of this question among the Ahmadi Muslims, followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908). According to him Jesus is not now living with God in heaven, but taken from the cross he lived on for a number of years in Kashmir, until he died at the age of one hundred and twenty years. They base their argument particularly on an interpretation of sura 23:50. These arguments are in my view not tenable. They are discussed at that place.

119. *Gardens*. This is the common image of paradise, which is drawn on in the Qur'an.

Sura 5, in its final section is clearly a corrective in respect to the Christians' understanding of Jesus. This corrective is placed in the mouth of Jesus himself, laid down in almost a liturgical manner. It praises God, as the only Lord who is to be served, who is witness and will punish the evil.

Righteous like Elijah Sura 6:85

Of the long suras that are placed at the beginning of the Qur'an, sura 6 is the first that received as a heading in the Egyptian edition of the 1920s: *Meccan, except for nine verses*. The nine non-Meccan verses are distributed among the 165 verses, or one might almost say 'strophes', that make up this sura. What is the significance of 'Meccan' in contrast to 'Medinan' that appears above suras 2, 3, 4 and 5? There is a biography of Muhammad by W. Montgomery Watt with the title, *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman*. In it the word 'prophet' describes the early Muhammad, the Meccan preacher with his message of social justice, the responsibility of the rich for the poor, but a mission that was difficult to discharge in the new trading city. Called at the age of 40 years, Muhammad preached with little success in Mecca, from 610 until in 622, when at the age of 53 years he was called to Medina by a number of contending Jewish and Arab tribes.

In the title of the book by Montgomery Watt (1960) the word 'statesman' describes his role in the city of Yathrib, that was later renamed Medina, literally and fully: *Medinatul Nabi*, City of the Prophet. According to Watt Muhammed was a prophet in Mecca, but in his later years a statesman in Medina. Snouck Hurgronje wrote cynically in 1880, as a twenty-three year old doctoral candidate, of Muhammad who left Mecca for Medina: 'he left his prophet's mantel behind in his native town.'³⁴ Later Islamic scholars have had much to say concerning the distinction between the 'young' and the 'old' Muhammad that certainly must not be exaggerated. It is clear to everyone without further discussion that we have to do here with a harmonious and logical development within a person, but nevertheless with an increase in differing emphases.

The language used is more poetic in Mecca, more prosaic in Medina, but it is nonetheless the language of one idiom, one person. The great majority of eastern and western

³⁴ In a dissertation on the haj-pilgrimage, *Het Mekkaanse Feest*. Republished Snouck Hurgronje, 1923:5.

Qur'anic specialists attribute nearly every part of what the Qur'an now is to that one person, Muhammad.

In one of the oldest Meccan suras, 87:18-19, an appeal is made to two of the best-known Jewish prophets:

This stands in the earliest pages

The pages of Abraham and Moses.

Later in the Meccan period this appeal to the earlier prophets was extended and became a much longer sequence. The longest reference with one exception is that in sura 21, where sixteen names are cited, including Mary and her son Jesus. In sura 38 there is one list with fifteen names, but they are not all Jewish prophets. A number of Arab prophets such as Ād and Thamūd appear. It is in sura 6 that we find the longest list of prophets. Here eighteen prophets appear, as a kind of appendix to a passage about Abraham.

6:82. Those among the believers who do not enwrap their belief with wrong, the security is for them and they follow in the right direction.

83. That was Our argument that We have given to Abraham against his people.

We raise to a higher rank whom We will.

84. And We gave him Isaac and Jacob to each of them We have pointed out the right direction. And to Noah We had earlier pointed out the right direction.

And among his descendents David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses and Aaron.

And so We reward those who do good.

85. And Zechariah, John, Jesus and Elijah, each belonged with the righteous

86. And Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah and Lot.

Each of them we have chosen above those who dwell in the world.

It is striking that no precise attention is paid here to chronology. Moses and Aaron are placed later in time, after David and Solomon. Ishmael is not placed at all in relation to Abraham.

Only in the Medina period would Abraham be glorified as the founder of the Ka'ba in Mecca, and also only then as the father of Ishmael. For the Jewish names we have not employed here the Arabic but rather the customary forms of the English Bible translations. Elijah (sometimes Elias) is *Ilyās* in Arabic. He was discussed further in the Qur'an only in 37:123-132 (where a brief reference is made to the oracle by fire against the followers of Baal), but in the later Arabic and Islamic legends of the prophets he became clearly identified with the biblical Elijah. Elisha (*alyasa'*) appears also in 38:46 but there only as one name in a longer inventory.

83. *Ranks*. This seems to contradict verse 2:136 (see at that place) where precisely the equality of the prophets is professed. Perhaps this only indicates that the prophets taken together, or as a group, are a higher 'type of humanity', but in each individual case chosen for a particular task. That seems also to be what verse 6:83 appears to suggest.

Sura 6 as a whole has as its foremost theme that humankind does not believe the prophets who are sent by God. Even if Muhammad had come with a written book (like Ezra for example, discussed with Jesus in Sura 9) people still would not believe him. Even if Muhammad had been supported by an angel it would not have settled the issue (6:7-9). That leads to a conclusion in 6:10, 'All who were before your time harassed the messengers with mockery, but they were hemmed in by that with which they incited ridicule.'

The list of important prophets in the Islamic tradition finally became a succession of 25. The seven missing in sura 6 but mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'an are: Adam, Idris (=Enoch? Andrew?), Saleh, Shu'aib and Hud (three Arab prophets) Zulkifli (=Joshua? = Ezekiel? A son of Job?), and finally Muhammad. In this sura Jesus is 'only' one out of the eighteen, and his role is not further elaborated, in contrast to the figure of Abraham in the passage preceding this.

Ezra and Jesus are not God's sons

Sura 9:30-31

The ninth sura is undoubtedly the most violent of the texts of the Qur'an. There is much talk about violence, without restrictions and often in a positive way. The sura has this feature in common with the books of Joshua and Judges in the Jewish Bible. This sura does not begin with the common opening formula (*basmallah*: In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate), but with two direct declarations of war, both made in the name of God. These texts have to do with the treaty of Hudaibiyyah (made with his Meccan opponents in March 628, six years after the prophet had moved from Mecca to Medina). In this treaty Muhammad promised that the Meccan unbelievers would not be killed, on the condition that he might make a pilgrimage to Mecca with his followers in the following year. The texts in the first section stipulate that after this event the period of peace shall expire. That is stated most threateningly in verse 5, which has been aptly named 'the verse of the sword':

9:5. When the sacred months are past, then kill the worshippers of many gods wherever you find them, seize them, beleaguer them, and watch out for them with every kind of ambush. But if they show repentance, perform the *salāt* [ritual prayer] and offer *zakāt* [alms for the poor], do not block their way. God is forgiving and merciful.

The ending is quite fine and positive, but the first section for which the verse is named, clearly exudes aggression. Who are 'worshippers of many gods'? Are they all those who acknowledge more than one God as authentic? Are the Christians and Jews implicated in this? That would be in line with the theme of a few verses that are found at the beginning of this long sura of 129 verses. In verses 17 and 28 these people were banned from the sacred places of prayer. Must we read this as an end to the moderate practice of toleration in which Christians also could find a place for worship in the Ka'ba? As

we have seen in the introductory chapter there were Islamic reports of portrayals of Jesus and Mary in the Ka'ba that still remained after the purification that took place in the year 629-630. This sura has no tenor of toleration. Verse 28 states explicitly, 'The worshippers of many gods are a pollution; after this year they may no longer approach the holy mosque. And if you fear poverty then God shall make you rich through his kindness'. Is this an indication of the falling-off of trade, as the relationship with Jews and Christians grew worse? Or must we see this only in the context of the conflict with the continually diminishing group of Muhammad's opponents in Mecca, the last followers of the old-Arabian religious traditions?

9:29. Fight against those who do not believe in God or in the last day and who do not forbid what God and his messenger have forbidden, and those from among people to whom the book is given who do not accept the religion of truth, until they pay the tribute out of hand and have been humbled.

Verse 29 refers to fighting, but with whom? In the whole history of the explanation of the Qur'an there have been many debates about this verse. The customary interpretation is firstly, that the worshippers of many gods must always be seen as the goal of warfare; secondly that the category of 'people to whom the book is given' is to be understood as a community that can be tolerated by Islam. They might well have to pay a special tribute. Who must we see as 'people to whom the book is given'? This generally denotes the Jews and the Christians. Some would include the Manicheans and Zoroastrians in this category, ultimately also the Hindus and Buddhists. For the Hindus to become part of the list it would need to be held that they were followers of the prophet Abraham and his revelation. Brahmin then would be derived from Ibrahim (the Arabic name for Abraham; possibly a plural *Barahim*, note the four stem consonants b.r.h.m). This wily argument came to be regarded as true in India between 1100 and 1750, where Muslims in the person of the Great Moguls ruled a Hindu majority. The Hindus could not be allowed to become lasting opponents, so they had to come under the privileges accorded by this verse to 'the people of the book'. The tribute here and elsewhere was called

Jizyah and was often stipulated in the law books. It was a personal tax (poll tax) by means of which non-Muslims could continue to dwell in a land ruled by Muslims. They enjoyed its protection and civic rights, but were subject to a number of limiting and sometimes humiliating measures.

These limiting regulations for Jews and Christians appear in this sura in the context of a polemical passage in which the Jews and Christians are condemned on two counts: divinisation of the great leaders, in this case Ezra and Jesus, and the divinisation of their everyday leaders, the rabbis and monks.

30. And the Jews say: Ezra is God's son
and the Christians say: the Messiah is God's son.
That is what they say with their mouths.
They come close to what the earlier unbelievers used to
say.
God contends with them, how can they deviate so far!
31. They take their rabbis and monks as lords
in the place of God and also the Messiah, the son of
Mary.
And they were commanded only to serve one God.
There is no God but Him. May He be praised.
Exalted He is above those they seek to join to Him as
companions.

30: *Ezra is God's son*. The reproach against the Christians is that they revere Jesus the Messiah (*al masīh*), and that they have made him God's son as we have often seen already in the Jesus verses and need not discuss further here. See the end of the commentary on sura 19, where a number of important instances are compared. Messiah is to be understood here as a personal name that is not further defined, rather than as 'Messiah' in the Jewish-Christian understanding.

The place given to Ezra here is strange. In reality the Jews have certainly not revered Ezra as a son of God or as God. There are however a number of post-biblical traditions in which Ezra is presented as someone who (like Moses and Elijah) is not dead, but was taken from among men and brought by God to himself. These traditions are exuberantly illustrated in the large

book by Ginsberg on the *Jewish Legends*. In the course of history Muslims themselves have also developed a similar picture of Ezra. Here we may present an example from a seventeenth-century Malay text by a scholar of Indian descent, Nuruddin ar-Raniri. From 1636 this man made a fine career in the sultanate of Aceh, until he was exiled in 1643. In a book about the different religious currents he combined a lively story about Ezra with legends about Jesus:

When God's prophet Ezra had grown up, the angel Gabriel came to him and blew into his mouth and from that time on he knew the whole of the Torah by heart.

When the whole people of Israel returned to Jerusalem they found some old people who had been left behind. They had not been held as prisoners. The returned prisoners told the old men, 'There is a man among us who knows the whole Torah by heart'. All the old men said, 'Have you heard whether that man was held prisoner with all the others who were sent in exile?' Then they sought God's prophet Ezra and brought him in contact with the men, and they said: 'Well then Ezra, prophet of God, show us the Torah.' Thereupon Ezra recited the Torah in front of them by heart. Then he told them that a copy of the Torah was put in an earthen jar that was buried under a grapevine at a certain place. After this the whole people of Israel saw that Ezra, peace be upon him, had recited the whole Torah without seeing it and also without omitting anything. Then the devil came, cursed may he be, in human form and said in the face of the whole people of Israel, 'Ezra is a son of God. If he was not the son of God how could he know the Torah by heart?'

There are but four men who know the Torah by heart. The first is God's prophet Moses, the second God's prophet Aaron, the third God's prophet Joshua, and the fourth God's prophet Ezra, blessing and peace be with them. After the devil had said: 'Ezra is a son of God' they declared as dogma that Ezra is God's son.

[Concerning Christianity it was then explained that the three Christian streams of the Melchites, Nestorians and Jacobites could be traced back to three disciples of Paul]

According to several scholars from the dominant stream of Islam the difference of opinion among Christians originated in consequence of Jesus' visit to the temple in Jerusalem, where he proclaimed his prophetic role. This occurred a hundred years after the death of Ezra. The Torah was no longer known to them. At that time a group from among the people of Israel challenged God's prophet Jesus, peace be with him, 'If you are God's prophet you must now be able to make the Torah known publicly, for God's prophet Ezra also brought the Torah to us in this way.' Thereupon God's prophet Jesus wrote down the Torah, from beginning to end, without any omission or any addition. The Jews were divided in their opinion as to what this meant. Some said, 'There are amplifications and omissions in the Torah'. Because of this God the Most High raised up the prophet Ezra to life and brought him into the temple. At that moment the whole people of Israel was in dispute at the Rock of God. God's prophet Ezra was recognised by some and they asked him: 'O prophet of God Ezra, where have you hidden away the Torah?' He responded saying: 'I have laid the Torah down under that pillar'. Hearing this they dug a groove under the pillar in question and came across the Torah. Then they compared this Torah with the Torah that God's prophet Jesus had written out, and they saw that both were identical: nothing was added or omitted.

At that instant Iblis, the accursed devil, entered. He seduced a group of them with the suggestion that Ezra was God's son, because while humankind in general can be raised up from the dead on the day of judgement Ezra had not died but was raised directly to heaven. Now therefore he was brought down again out of heaven. And a proportion of the Jews said of this, 'Jesus is God's son, how, unless he was God's son, should he have known the Torah by heart, without his having previously heard it?' (Steenbrink 2005:242-5)

Considering the abundance of this additional material in the traditional commentaries, we should add that many modern commentators believe that all this type of stories represent later legendary insertions. According to many the Qur'an must now be allowed to be sufficient in itself. The Qur'an must be interpreted from the Qur'an and then such things should be seen to be wholly outside the interpretation of the Qur'an.

31. *They name their rabbis and their monks lords in the place of God, and also the Messiah, the son of Mary.* The rabbis were sharply criticised elsewhere in the Qur'an. See for example 3:79. Apart from that 5:44 and 5:63 are somewhat more positive about the rabbis. Concerning monks, who are here so sharply judged, there appears a very positive statement in 5:82. There Christians were seen as close to the Muslims 'because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant.' See also in this regard 24:35-38 (for a text about a sanctuary lamp, a perpetual lamp in a church or a monastery) and 57:27.

No child for God! [1] Sura 10:68

Sura 10 is regarded as a late Meccan revelation. Its principal theme is the 'man from their midst' (verse 2) who was sent to the people of Mecca, but was rejected. Muhammad was called a sorcerer by his opponents (also in verse 2). He himself got to hear them demand, 'Come with a Qur'an other than this one or change it' (verse 15) or they asked for a great miracle: 'Has he then no sign sent down to him from his Lord?' (verse 20). But the unbelievers must watch out. 'God is swifter in devising a plan. Our messengers record all that you plan' (verse 21). Towards the end of the sura, the great prophets of former times are mentioned, notably Noah (71-74) and Moses (75-94). The sura is named after the prophet Jonah or Yunus as he is known in Arabic. He appears only in verse 98, when the city of Yunus (Nineveh according to many Muslim exegetes) is used as an example.

10:98. Why is there no city that came to belief and that then had benefit from its belief other than the people of Jonah? When they came to belief We removed their punishment from them and We gave them for a time the use and profit of their possessions.

Shortly before the brief reference to Noah there is an isolated verse concerning Jesus:

10:68. They say: 'God has taken a child for himself.'
Praised may He be! He is in need of nothing, from Him is everything that is in the heavens and that is on the earth.
You have no authorisation for this.
Do you say about God that of which you have no knowledge?

As explained in connection with sura 112 there are a number of verses in the Qur'an that take up the belief of the Arabs that God might have children, and particularly daughters. Must we read this verse as opposed to the more general Arabian ideas, or more specifically against the Christian idea of Jesus? In itself it can stand here also as a rejection of the possibility that God could

have sons or even daughters, just as in 43:16 and 53:21. 'Child' is always gender neutral, as is the word used here, *walad*. In this respect it should also be pointed out that in the preceding verse 66 there is explicit reference to those who worship 'partners' or associates in the place of God.

10:66 Surely, to God belongs everyone that is in the heavens and in the earth. Those who invoke others besides God, making associates in His divinity, only follow conjectures and are merely guessing.

No child for God! [2] Sura 18:4

Sura 18 is called *Al Kahf* or 'people of the cave'. It is a story that is reproduced in verses 9-26. Actually it was not told as a story but as a meditation on the Christian legend of the 'Seven Sleepers of Ephesus'. This concerned a number of Christians who during the time of the persecution under the Emperor Decius (249-251) took shelter in a cave, fell into a deep sleep and many years later awoke in a secure Christian world. According to the Christian legend this awakening was during the reign of the Emperor Theodosius (379-395). The Qur'an in verse 18:25 gives the length of their sleep as 309 years. From about 500 they were venerated by the Christians in Ephesus and the cave became a place of pilgrimage. As is usual in the Qur'an we find no complete re-telling of the story, but rather a kind of sermon or meditation on its elements. The highpoint is the awakening of the young men and their faith:

18:14-15 Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth.
We shall not call on any god in the place of Him; and should
we have done so we would have uttered a deviation. Our
people here have taken for themselves gods in His place. Why
have they not been able to bring forward a clear authorisation
for this?

This sura has been placed in the late Meccan period when Muhammad had to cope with a growing opposition from the Meccans to his message of absolute monotheism. Nor was he recognised in his person as a prophet. This same theme appears in the opening verses of this sura, clearly the opening words of a written revelation:

1 Praise God who has sent down the book to his servant and
who has ensured that there is no deviation in it.
2. A book that is straight in order to warn people
of a heavy punishment that will come from Him
and that he might proclaim good news to the believers who do
right deeds
and that there will be a good reward for them.

3. Wherein they shall remain forever.
4. And in order that he should warn those who say:
God has taken a child for himself.
5. They have no knowledge of such a thing nor had their fathers.

Just as in other examples, of which a number are taken up in the commentary on sura 19, it is unclear here in verse 4 whether this passage is a condemnation of the Arabian belief in children for God (and especially daughters), or whether it is against the Christian idea of Jesus as son of God.

Son of Mary **Sura 19:16-40 and 88-96**

The nineteenth sura of the Qur'an is appropriately named for Mary/Maryam, in that she and her son Jesus have an important place within it. After an introductory passage about John/Yahya ('the Baptist', 2-15) there is a passage about Mary and Jesus (16-40) followed by Abraham (41-51), other prophets: Moses, Aaron, Ishmael, Idris and Noah (51-65), a general threat against those who do not follow the prophets (66-74), a more specific warning addressed to those who declare that God would have a son (75-96), followed by a solemn closing declaration that all of this was revealed in the common language of the hearer, Muhammad (97-98).

It is of importance for the structure of this chapter that the Arabic *zakara* (to speak, to state) also occurs in the name of the first figure, Zechariah, the father of John/Yahya. In Hebrew the name means 'speaking-of-God'. A form of the verb *zakara* occurs in verses 2, 16, 41, 51, 54, 56.

This section of the Qur'an originates from the early poetic-prophetic period of Muhammad's life. This appears especially from two features: the verses are generally short and are bound in a tight rhyme scheme. Verses 1-74 have an end rhyme in -yā with the exception of the polemical section 34-40, where consistently the end rhyme is -ūm, -ūn, or -īn. After that verses 75-96 more or less return again to the earlier rhyme with -dā or -zā.

We find here three forms of the divine name. The best known, *Allah*, occurs in verses 30, 35, 36, 49, 58, 81: thus in total six times. As the Arabic name for the sovereign god that is not to be wondered at, because it became part of a common combination as 'God's servant' (Abdallah, verse 30) or more particularly on account of the emphasis on the one superior god, in opposition to many deities. More often we find here the divine name *rahmān* or 'merciful', in 18, 26, 44, 45, 58, 61, 69, 75, 78, 88, 91, 92, 93, 96, thus in total fourteen times, but not at all in the polemical fragment, 34-40. The third divine name is 'my Lord' as *rabbī* or *rabb*. This name occurs in this sura in the

verses 3, 4, 6, 9, 10, 19, 21, 24, 48, 55, 64, 65, thus a total of twelve times. It is striking what intimacy and familiarity are reflected in all the frequent combinations made up of 'My Lord', 'your Lord, 'our Lord'.

Of the three names, Allah, Rabb and Rahmān, the latter is indicative of the early and middle Meccan era suras. In later periods this divine name disappears for a more exclusive use of the names Rabb and Allah.

The average length of the sentences in this sura is considerably longer than those in the earliest Meccan suras, among which are found especially many of the shortest suras. There we often encounter sentences with an average of fifteen syllables. Here that is expanded to about twenty-five syllables. One sentence is barely able to be pronounced in a single breath and must usually be taken in two or three parts. The structure is clear because the final words rhyme. In comparison with the suras from the later Medina period, the verses here are again relatively short; at the most two lines compared with some of eight or ten in the Medina period.

We must ask ourselves what it means that this sura is placed in the early or middle Meccan period in contrast to the later suras. The average modern Muslim still sees the Qur'an as a whole, as an indivisible revelation from God. From a division of the Qur'an into Meccan (early) and Medinan (later) suras, should we create a kind of contrast between the early and the later Muhammad? Muslims recognise clearly a difference in emphasis, but certainly no really distinct contrast. Provisionally we might define the difference in emphasis as a general, almost problem-free and almost seamless reception of aspects of Judaism and Christianity in the new religion of Islam in the early revelations, compared to a greater polemic in the later revelations where the unity of the new religion of Islam is accentuated precisely over against Christianity and Judaism. Because the verses about Jesus dominate the whole sura, we present here the full text of Sura Maryam:

1. Kāf Hā Yā 'Ayn Sād

Zechariah and the birth of John ('the Baptist')

2. Speak of the favour of your Lord to his servant Zechariah!
3. He cried out to his Lord, cried out in secret.
4. Saying: 'My Lord, my bones are weak,
My head is white and bald
But in my prayer I never feel unsatisfied.
5. Only I fear for the family in time to come:
My wife is barren.
Grant me an heir from yourself.
6. who would be my heir and heir to Jacob's lineage,
make him, my Lord, acceptable to you.'
7. 'Zechariah! We announce to you one, whose name is John.
We have not created such a lad before.'
8. He said: 'A young lad for me? And my wife is barren!
And my life is far advanced.'
9. He said: 'It is so. Your Lord has declared:
"It is simple. I made you before this, out of naught, and
nothing at all."'
10. He said: 'Lord, give me a sign'.
He said: 'You shall not speak to any person,
for three nights although you are without ill health or
sickness.
11. He came out to his people from the holy place;
commanding them to praise God
in the evening and at daybreak.
12. 'John, take hold of the book strongly and firmly.'
We gave him wisdom as a young man
13. and compassion from our side and purity.
He was righteous.
14. and full of love toward his parents
and no rebellious oppressor.
15. may peace be upon him on the day that he was born,
on the day he dies,
and on the day that he will be raised up again to life.

Mary, mother of Jesus, the story

16. And speak of Mary in the book.
She went away from her family to an eastern place;

17. she sought to be screened from them.
We sent her Our Spirit.
He acted before her in every way as a man.
18. She said: 'I seek from the Merciful protection against
you
if perhaps you are honourable.'
19. He said: 'I am the messenger of your Lord.
(To announce) to you the gift of a virtuous boy.'
20. She said: 'How shall I receive a boy?
No man has touched me!
And I am no sinner!'
21. He said: 'So it is! Your Lord has said:
It is easy for me.
So We appoint him to be a sign for people
And a mercy from us.
It is a thing decreed.'
22. Thus she became pregnant with him
And went with him into a lonely place.
23. When the pains drove her to the trunk of a palm tree;
She said: 'Alas, if only I had died before this,
wholly in oblivion.'
24. But he called to her from beneath:
'Do not be distressed with grief;
Your Lord has set a little stream under you.
25. Shake the trunk of the palm toward yourself
And it will let fresh, ripe dates fall for you.
26. Eat and drink and arise from your woe
And if you see anyone, say:
I have made a vow with the Merciful,
To speak to no one today.'
27. She brought him to her people.
They said: 'O Mary,
You have done a dreadful thing.
28. A sister of Aaron,
Your father was no evil man,
Your mother was not immodest.'
29. But she pointed to him.
They said: 'How can we speak with
One who still sleeps in the cradle?
30. He said: 'I am the servant of God.

- He has given me the book;
Made me a prophet.
31. He has made me a blessing, where I am,
And has enjoined on me the *salat* and *zakat*,
All my life long.
32. And made me full of love toward my mother
and no rebellious oppressor.
33. Peace is with me on the day that I was born,
On the day that I die,
And on the day that I will be raised up again to life.'

No son of God: a polemic

34. Such was Jesus, the son of Mary
the word of truth, over which they dispute.
35. God is not such that he should make a child!
Praise Him! When He determines a matter
He merely says to it: Be! And it is.
36. God is my Lord and your Lord;
So serve Him. This is a straight path.
37. But the parties entangle one another.
So woe to the unbelievers
on account of the testimony, the day of the great
judgement.
38. What shall they clearly hear and see
On the day that they come before Us!
But those who commit injustice today go about in clear
error.
39. And warn them of the day of remorse
When the decision is determined,
For they err, not believing.
40. We shall inherit the earth and all that is on it and to Us
they will be brought back.

Abraham

41. And speak in the book about Abraham.
He was a sincere man and a messenger of God.
42. He said to his father:
'Father, why worship something that cannot hear,
nor see and which can be of no profit to you?
43. Father, knowledge has come to me

- That has not come to you.
 So follow me in this, and I will lead you to a level path.
44. Father, do not serve the satan.
 The satan is a foe of the Merciful.
45. Father, I am afraid lest a penalty from the Merciful shall strike you,
 And you become a follower of satan.'
46. The father replied: 'Will you turn away from my gods, Abraham?
 If you do not desist I shall stone you;
 Now go away from me for a long time.'
47. He replied: 'Peace be upon you!
 I shall ask forgiveness for you from my Lord.
 He is friendly to me.
48. I will turn myself away from you and from what you invoke in God's stead.
 I call upon my Lord. Perhaps I can then free you from setback.'
49. And when he had turned himself away from them and from what they worshipped in the place of God,
 We granted him Isaac and Jacob
 Each made a messenger of God.
50. And we bestowed Our mercy on them and gave them a trustworthy and distinguished speech.

Moses and other prophets

51. And speak of Moses in the book,
 He was chosen, a prophet and messenger of God.
52. We called him from the right-hand side of the mountain,
 Brought him closer for intimate conversation.
53. And we gave him out of Our mercy
 his brother Aaron as a messenger of God.
54. And speak in the book about Ishmael,
 He held himself true to his promise, and was a prophet and messenger of God.
55. He enjoined upon his people prayer and almsgiving.
 He found friendship with his Lord.
56. And speak in the book about Idris.
 He was a sincere man and a messenger of God.
57. We raised him up to a high position.

58. These were some of those among the prophets on whom
God bestowed grace,
of the posterity of Adam,
and of those We have carried with Noah,
and of the posterity of Abraham and Israel,
and of those whom we have brought onto a good path
and chosen.
Whenever the signs of the Merciful were recited to them
They bowed themselves down in tears.

Eschatology: threat and promises

59. Then after them came successors
Who neglected the prayers and followed their passionate
desires;
They are thus on the way to destruction.
60. Except those who show repentance,
Believe and act validly.
For these are the ones who will enter the garden
And they will not be treated wrongly in any way.
61. The gardens of Eden which the Merciful has promised
for His servants;
concealed, but His promise holds firm.
62. They will hear therein no empty talk, but only Peace!
For them there is food from the morning to the late
evening
63. That is the garden: an inheritance for Our pious servants.

A testimony or consideration of angels

64. We do not descend except on the command of your
Lord.
From Him is what is before us
And what is behind us
And what is between us.
And your Lord is always in readiness for you.
65. The Lord of the heavens and the earth and what is
between.
Serve Him and persevere in his service
Do you know of any other like Him?

Polemic: the menacing gravity of eternal punishment

66. The man says: If I die,
Would I then be brought to life?
67. Does the man not reflect then on
How We created him when he was still nothing?
68. By your Lord, we gather them and the satans,
We will put them on their knees round the hall of Hell
69. Then we shall pull out from every sect
those who most fiercely rebelled against the Merciful.
70. We know well those who most deserve to be burned.
71. There is no one among you who will not come down to
it.
For your Lord this is a decree that stands firm.
72. Then we save those who are fearful,
leaving the evil ones behind on their knees.
73. And when Our signs are read out to them as clear
evidence,
the unbelievers say against those who believe:
'Which of the two groups has the better place and better
council?'
74. How many generations have We already brought to
nothing before them?
These ones were superior in property and condition!
75. Say: If a person is in error,
Perhaps the Merciful delays for them.
Until they see what has been announced to them
the punishment or the hour.
Then shall they know who is in the worst position
And the weaker forces.
76. And God makes better the guidance to those who allow
themselves to be guided.
And perseverance in good is considered better by your
Lord:
Reward, in plenty is the outcome.

Polemic against unbeliever(s)

77. Have you seen him who does not believe in Our signs,
who says: 'For me possessions and descendents!'
78. Has he penetrated through to the secret
or has he entered into an agreement with God?
79. Well no! We shall record what he says

- and lengthen further his punishment.
80. And We shall bring after him what he has said,
And he shall come to us, desolate.
81. And they have taken gods to themselves alongside God
in order that through them they might become powerful.
82. Instead, there shall be no thanks for their worship
they offer them only hostility.
83. Have you not seen that we have set the satans against the
unbelievers?
They stir them up to rebellion.
84. Do not point too hastily against them;
we have already started counting off.
85. The day we bring the pious before the Merciful like a
council of the people:
86. We shall drive the evildoers to hell like a herd of cattle
to the drinking place.
87. Then only those who have concluded a covenant with the
Merciful can trust in intercession.

'God has no child' polemic

88. And they say: 'The Merciful has himself made a child.'
89. You have indeed committed a horrible thing.
90. As though the heaven would burst of it,
the earth split open, the mountains fall down upon each
other,
91. that they had procured a child for the Merciful.
92. It is not consonant with the Merciful that he should make
a child for himself.
93. No one who is in the heavens and the earth,
comes before the Merciful but as servant.
94. He has summed them up and numbered them exactly.
95. Every one of them will come to Him on the day of
judgement, singly.
96. Those who believe and do good deeds,
For them the Merciful has love available.

The Qur'an was sent down in Arabic

97. We have thus made it easy in your own tongue, so that
with it you should be preaching good news to the pious
and with it warnings to the race given to disputation.

98. And how many generations have we before their time
brought to nothing?
Can you still perceive something from one among them,
Or do you hear a clamour of them?

The context: the Abyssinian adventure. Muhammad received the first revelation when he was about forty. He preached on it for twelve years in Mecca, before the move to the city of Medina where he also became a political leader. Time after time in the Meccan period (about 610-622) he had problems with the recognition of the voices that he heard. The first revelations were still difficult for him to interpret and only through the support of his wife Khadijah was there authentic assurance that he was called, although shortly after the first revelation there came a long pause during which the voice was not heard. That also signified uncertainty. Following the resumption of the revelations an unwillingness and open opposition emerged among those around him, on account of the tenor of his message. About five years after he had come forward as a prophet a number of his followers departed for Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia) to escape the opposition. Abyssinia had a Christian ruler who received the migrants cordially. This ruler (known as the 'Negus') questioned the group, who were represented by a nephew of Muhammad, Ja'far ibn Abu Talib, and a certain Zubair ibn Awwam, as to whether they had with them anything that came from God:

When Ja'far said that he had, the Negus commanded him to read it to him, so he read him a passage from the Sura 'Maryam'. The Negus wept until his beard was wet and the bishops wept until their scrolls were wet when they heard what he read to them. Then the Negus said, 'Of a truth, this and what Jesus brought have come from the same niche. You two may go, for by God I will never give them [your group] up to them [your enemies] and they shall not be betrayed. (Guillaume, 1955:152.)

The unbelieving leaders from Mecca did not have confidence in this resolution of the issue and in their turn sent a small embassy to Abyssinia led by Amr ibn al As, who thirty years later (in 642) was the great general who would conquer Egypt,

but still in 629 an opponent of Muhammad. Amr recounted to the Negus that the group he had sheltered asserted that Jesus, the son of Mary, was only a servant and was not a son of God. The Negus called the rival Meccans to his presence and demanded further information

Ja'far answered, 'We say about him that which our prophet brought, saying, he is the servant of God, and his apostle, and his spirit, and his word, which he cast into Mary, the blessed virgin' The Negus took a stick from the ground and said, 'By God, Jesus, son of Mary, does not exceed what you have said by the length of this stick.' (Guillaume, 1955:152.)

Here the Negus was not only depicted as a protector of the early Muslims, but also a portion of the Islamic confession of faith was given by his mouth. According to this account a number of Muslims stayed in Abyssynia to the end of Muhammad's life, that is to say up to the period when as a successful politician he was able to make Islam a triumphant religion.

What should we think then about this brief account of the Abyssinian adventure, told in the oldest biography of Muhammad? The stories, generally speaking, are fairly complicated. The Muslims went off in small differing groups: does that indicate a difference of opinion in these heterogeneous groups? Later accounts give special honour to the earliest migrants and in this way family histories are able to be enhanced so that their descendents are given greater honour. However that may be, it is not necessary for us to understand the background of the Abyssinian adventure in considering these texts. The Qur'an itself does not seem to be aware of these events: it has not the slightest reference to it and the whole story may have been invented in a later period. Nevertheless, this account of the context points us again to the Christian environment of Muhammad's message and to the possibility that we have here a re-presentation of Arab-Christian stories and possibly even of hymns.

Observations on several sections of this sura

2: *Speak of the favour of your Lord.* As indicated in the introduction to this chapter the word ‘speak’ appears five more times in this sura. Here it is not the verb in the imperative mood *azkur* that is used, as it is in verses 16, 41, 51, 54 and 56, but the noun, *zikr*. Thus a better translation could be ‘speech’. In the translation here we have chosen a parallel with the five other places in which a form of this word appears.

Just as is very often the case in the suras that begin with ‘mysterious letters’ (here K H Y ‘ S) there follows in verse 2 a reference to a ‘writing’ (*kitāb* for example in 2:2, and also in combination with *Qur’an*, recitation, in many other suras, such as sura 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14; sura 36 only has *Qur’an*). *Zikr* indicates not a written but a spoken revelation, as does the word *Qur’an*. In Muhammad’s Arabia ‘literature’, and especially poetry, was primarily oral, verbal. The word *azkur* appears four times in sura 38 (17, 41, 45, and 48) as an introduction to similar stories. In sura 73:8 and 76:25 the command ‘speak’ reverts to an injunction, ‘Remember the name of your Lord’ in connection with the prescribed prayer and so could there also be translated accurately as ‘proclaim praise’, as is the present-day meaning of the word *zakara* or *zikr*. So also the name Zechariah! Thus to speak here is understood as proclaimed speech.

4. *Never unsatisfied.* Is to be read in the sense that Zechariah is ‘not disappointed in God’, although he has still not received a child.

12. *We gave him wisdom as a young man* Here, and also elsewhere in the *Qur’an*, *wisdom* can point to a section of the (Jewish) scriptures, the Wisdom literature (*Hikmah*). Refer also to sura 3:48 where in connection with Jesus Scripture, Wisdom and Torah are mentioned alongside the Gospel (*Injil*). However, verse 13 is a grammatical continuation of verse 12 and it speaks only about actual human attributes. Therefore this interpretation of wisdom as part of scripture appears less certain.

14-15 and 32-33. *The ‘final refrain’ for John and Jesus considered further.* The conclusions of the section concerning John and of that concerning Jesus show striking resemblances.

So one might conclude that a kind of ‘concluding refrain’ was said that in both cases was almost the same:

<i>The John passage</i>	<i>The Jesus passage</i>
19:14. and full of love toward his parents and no rebellious oppressor. 19:15. May peace be upon him on the day that he was born, on the day he dies, and on the day that he will be raised up again to life.	19:32. and made me full of love toward my mother and no rebellious oppressor. 19:33. Peace is with me on the day that I was born. on the day that I die, and on the day that I will be raised up again to life.

The passages are adapted to the two different stories. John is spoken of in the third person by his parents. The passage concerning Jesus is set in the ‘I’ perspective and was spoken with reference only to his mother. The prophets seem rather one on top of the other in the Qur’an and so the French scholar Jomier (1997:49-51) once said that they possess a quite insipid character. They are strongly modelled on each other. But the same could be said of the Jewish prophets in the New Testament, for they are also described with little detail. This close resemblance of the verses about John/Jahya with those of Jesus should save us from drawing unnecessary conclusions here about the death and resurrection of Jesus. The verses here seem still to have no knowledge at all of the discussion of Jesus’ death on the cross in sura 4.

A surprising observation must be made here in relation to the oldest preserved text of the Qur’an, the inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, constructed in 691-2 CE or sixty years after the death of Muhammad. 19:33-36 is there present as a beautiful and clear inscription in mosaic, with the exception of one the word ‘and’ of 19:36 and the change from first to third person in 19:33. This, in fact strengthens the similarity between the ‘refrain’ on John and that on Jesus. Some scholars consider the whole construction of the Dome on the Rock not as a Muslim but as a Christian sanctuary, ordered by Caliph Abdul Malik who therefore should not be a Muslim but a

Christian. We do not enter here into this debate. We take the text of the Qur'an as it is, but keep open the possibility of Christian sources or influences in its wording. (Luxenberg 2004 and Ohlig 2007)

16. *And speak of Mary in the book...she went away from her family to an eastern place.*

A single Muslim commentator sees this as a reference to sura 3:37-42, where a detailed picture is presented of Mary growing up as a young woman who from her early youth (three years of age!) grew up as a kind of recluse in a single cell on the eastern side of the temple complex, separated from the rest of humankind. As already noted in the commentary on 3:37 there is a reference here to the stories or legends that appear also in the Proto-evangelium of James.

17: *Our Spirit*. The Mary-Jesus cycle of the Qur'an has greatest similarity to the account given by Luke. In Luke 1:35 the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and says among other things: 'The holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you'. In this account Gabriel and the Spirit are different. In the Qur'an the Spirit is portrayed as an angel. The commentaries usually identify the Spirit with Gabriel (in Arabic *Jibrīl*), who is identified by name three times in the Qur'an as the one who mediated the revelation to Muhammad (2:97-98) and who appeared as a helper for the believers (66:4). Some speak of the Spirit simply as Spirit (*rūh*, like the Hebrew *ruah*) others consider him/her as an extension of the holy, trustworthy, or also indeed speak of 'our Spirit' which means: 'God's Spirit'. However in none of these cases do Muslims read any reference to a kind of divine tri-unity. In 4:171 and 5:75 a 'triad' for God was rejected, without involving reference to this Spirit.

Later folk tales have raised the question of how physical contact between the angel and Mary might have been possible. In this tradition the angel first blew into a garment (blouse or jacket) that Mary had taken off and when Mary put it back on her pregnancy began. Probably occasioned by other debates with Christians there is also speculation as to whether Mary experienced menstruation. Many think she did not (because menstruation automatically carries impurity with it), others that

it occurred only once. According to the stories of Jesus' birth it was thought indeed that he was born not by way of the vagina but through Mary's mouth, or born through her navel. (Steenbrink 2003:485) That however is no longer Qur'an, but is popular conjecture.

22. Thus she became pregnant with him and went with him into a lonely place.

Gabriel's announcement appears in sura 3, but this birth scene does not. We can only guess where the details of this childbirth have come from. There is a debate among Muslims about the length of Mary's pregnancy; from a single hour to the full period of nine months. The version in the Qur'an indeed recounts that Mary, after the announcement, sought out a quiet place (in the older accounts a desert, in the Javanese version a thick primal forest!) as a place to give birth. The commentators offer as an argument for the short period of pregnancy the fact that according to Jewish law a lewd woman must be stoned to death. This is not acceptable in Mary's case, so in order that no one will know of her pregnancy it was of short duration. This also is not drawing us back to the text of the Qur'an.

In the Qur'an itself Joseph does not appear at all, but in a single later story (as in Mirkhond and Tha'labi) he appears in fact to speak. Then he asks Mary, 'Was there ever a harvest without sowing? Can there be seed without harvest?' Mary answered him, 'Would you maintain that God the Exalted first created the harvest? And was that indeed without seed! Or did God create the seed first? In that case there occurred no harvest beforehand. But you should say that they were created at the same time, which means that they did not come into being the one out of the other.' Joseph insisted: 'Was there ever a tree that grew without receiving water?' Mary responded, 'God created the tree first and after that water as a source of life.' Then Joseph put forward his third question, 'Was ever a child born without a father?' Mary: 'But of course. Adam had neither father nor mother.' At that Joseph fell silent saying only, 'I only stole philosophical questions. I am sorry for my impertinence, but I want to know precisely how you came to be pregnant'. At that Mary said: 'God directed me by means of a Word that should come from Him. He is called the Messiah, Jesus, the son

of Mary.’ With that Joseph was clearly content. (Steenbrink 2003:147)

Tha’labi (c. 1025), Rabghuzi (c. 1250) and Mirkhond (d. 1498) were medieval encyclopaedists. Modern Muslims reject most of these miracle stories that are unknown to the Qur’an. The most radical critics of the miracle stories are the Ahmadiyah Muslims. Maulana Muhammad Ali wrote in reference to this (on 19:21a) ‘Mary became pregnant by him in the normal manner, the manner by which women become pregnant with children.’ On verse 3:44 he refers to an episode from the meeting between Muhammad and the Christians from Najrān where in the midst of other texts there is set one specially concerning the manner of Jesus’ birth, that states: ‘Jesus was formed in his mother’s womb exactly like other children of Adam’ (Guillaume 1955:272).

23-26: *The Palm*. Mary found a flourishing palm tree in the wilderness, beneath which a creek flowed, with reference to which the baby Jesus consoles his mother. This resembles closely a variant of a story from the pseudo-gospel of Matthew, chapter 20, where something of the same kind was told at the time of the flight into Egypt: also in the wilderness where there was no water. (Elliott 1993, Siderky 1933:142-3) *He called to her from beneath* was thought by some to refer to an angel, but mostly is taken to refer to the newly born Jesus. *Ripe dates*. In commentaries it was thought that this indicated that it was not the season for dates, whereby the miracle would be further intensified. The Ahmadiyah commentaries are here also resistant to the miracle. Maulana Muhammad Ali pointed out that it was altogether uncertain that Jesus had been born on the 25th December.

28: *Sister of Aaron*. Mary, the mother of Jesus, appears in the Qur’an to be identical with Mary/Maryam/Miriam, the sister of Moses. This subject is more amply discussed at the beginning of the commentary on sura 3, which is named after Imrān/Amram.

29: *How can we speak with one who still sleeps in the cradle?* In 3:46 the speaking of Jesus from the cradle is also mentioned. There, however, it is not clear whether the address that followed was also from the cradle or from later in Jesus’ life. His

speaking as a small child occurs also in the gospel of pseudo-Matthew, but at the time of the journey into Egypt. There it was recounted how Mary while she sat in the shade of the palm tree asked for dates. Joseph observed that the tree was too high whereupon the baby Jesus commanded the tree to bend down. No sooner had Jesus given it permission to become upright than the branches sprang up again. After that a spring of water sprang up by the root of the tree. (Elliott 1993:95)

31: *Salat* and *zakat*. These are the technical terms for the obligatory ritual prayer, offered five times each day (*salat* in contrast to personal and free prayer, *doa*) and the obligatory offering for the poor, for the leaders of society and for people who serve the common interests like teachers (*zakat*). These are two of the well-known ‘five pillars’ or five basic personal obligations of Islam (the remaining three are: pronouncing the confession of faith, fasting in Ramadan and the pilgrimage or haj to Mecca).

34-40: *A polemical passage inserted later?* With verse 33 it seems that the full circle of the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, was completed with a brief reference to the whole life of Jesus: birth, death and rising on a later day, just as in verse 15 the passage on John ended with similar words. The polemical passage, in a different end-rhyme from the narrative verses, is seen by many as a freestanding unit, perhaps ‘inserted’ at a later period. That could have occurred. But to conclude from this that the ‘early Muhammad’ still had no controversy with Christianity and that only the ‘later’ Muhammad (that is to say the Muhammad of Medina) experienced this, is too hasty a conclusion. First of all the verse length runs through without a break. Secondly, we must bear in mind that the second polemical passage in 19:88-95 having an end-rhyme with the long ā is in line with the larger section of the sura. Then there is the general consideration concerning the purpose of the sura: the Qur’an is not a reading book for the individual, it is not only the prayer book but it was also the sermon-book of the early Muslim community. In a sermon it is not uncommon for a transition to occur from a narrative, explanatory style to one that is more exhortatory or corrective. Besides, the Dome of the Rock in

Jerusalem has a full quotation of 19:33-36, without interruption, as mentioned above.

In connection with this we must ask ourselves what the ultimate intention of the prophet stories is, including those about Mary and Jesus. Is there a 'collective remembering', a liturgical anamnesis of the history of salvation, spoken of in the Islamic liturgy known as the Friday service? In a fascinating article on the function of the Qur'anic text in the Islamic liturgy Angelika Neuwirth (1996) has on the one side denied that there is anything in Islamic worship that reaches back to the foundational moments in the salvation history such as is the case in Jewish and Christian liturgy. On the other hand she notes that the 'historical suras' function as a *paranesis*, a homiletical admonition. In the conclusion to this book we shall go more deeply into the question of how far we can speak of an Islamic salvation history, and of how far the prophetic history in general and particularly that of Mary and Jesus has a place there. Finally: The expression that God 'has himself made a child' (or has himself taken a son, another translation of the same Arabic: *ittakhadha waladan*) appears especially in the Meccan sura, except once in an early Medina sura (2:116). So on this basis an opposition here between the Meccan and the Medina Muhammad is out of place.

35, 88 and 92: *God has not made a child for himself*. The statement *lā ittakhadha waladan*, translated here as 'God has made himself no child' appears a number of times in the Qur'an. Below we present for comparison the Qur'anic references, in which the verb form *ittakhadha* appears, along with a single example of a related form of the same verb (*yatakhidhu*, in 39:4). Three matters stand out in the comparison:

- 1: next to a translation with 'take' appears a single case of translation as 'make', but it always refers to something that was not made out of nothing, so must be understood as a transformation out of something else.
- 2: A great number of these texts relate to our major theme, that God himself has made no son/child.
- 3: Some translators rightly do not translate with 'son', but in more gender-neutral terms with 'child'. This is also important in connection with the explicit mention of daughters for God in

sura 53:19-21, and in the polemical reaction to this: 'For you sons, for Him of daughters as progeny?'. In this connection we must also read sura 112, where no clear indication is given regarding a son or a daughter, just indignation that God should give birth:

Say: He is God, one
 God, the everlasting
 Not giving birth and is not born;
 And no one is like Him, not one.

Can we find from the following synopsis, and especially the description of different translations of the word *ittakhaza*, what was going on in the choice between take and make? The word 'child' or 'offspring' (*walad*) need not have a connection to the disavowal of Jesus as son of God. Some of the verses below, as also sura 112, probably oppose the Arab conception of divine figures as sons or daughters of Allah.

- 2:116 They say: God has taken a child
- 4:125 God took Abraham to himself as a friend
- 7:148 And the people of Moses, after he went away, *made* for themselves from their ornaments a life-like calf that could low...they *made* it for themselves and surely they were those who do wrong.
- 10:68 They say: God has taken a child for himself
- 17:40 Has your Lord then reserved only sons for you and has He taken for Himself female beings from among the angels?
- 18:4 And as a warning to those who say: God has taken a child for himself
- 18:61 at the time when they had reached the junction between the two, they forgot the fish and this *took* its way freely in the sea
- 18:63 ... [about the fish that escaped from Moses and his servant] and so it *took* its way into the sea
- 19:35 it is not for God that he should himself *take* a child
- 19:78 ...or has he *taken out* a contract with the Merciful
- 19:87 ...no others shall obtain intercession apart from those who have taken a contract with the Merciful
- 19:88 They say: the Merciful himself has taken/made a child

- 21:26 They say: The Merciful himself has taken a child. Praise to Him! No, they are but venerable servants
- 23:91 God has not himself taken a child
- 25:2 He to whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth and who himself has taken no child has created all things measured out in due order
- 25:43 See one: who takes his own desire as his god, could you be a business manager for such a person?
- 39:4 Had God himself wished to take a child, he could have chosen for himself from what he had created whatever pleased him. Praise to Him. He is God, the One, the Almighty.
- 43:16 Or has He himself then taken daughters from what He created and kept sons only for you?
- 72:3 Exalted is the majesty of our Lord. He has taken neither a consort nor a child.
- 73:19 Thus whoever will: *take for yourself* a way to his Lord
- 76:29 Thus whoever will: *take for yourself* a way to his Lord (=73:19)
- 78:39 Whoever will, *turn* to his Lord as destiny.

Notes on verses 41-98

Because in this book we are discussing the Jesus verses we have given full attention to the first forty verses of this important sura. As we have taken up the whole sura in translation by way of context, we will provide a few notes so that the section about Jesus can be seen in connection with the later elucidations concerning Abraham, Moses, other prophets and other themes that come up for discussion.

41. *Abraham...an upright man.* The name of honour for Abraham is here *siddiq*, as was followed by later Muslim practice. In later passages of the Qur'an he is often called *hanif*, coming from the Syriac *hanpa* for 'pagan', that is someone who was not an adherent of one of the major religions, Judaism, Christianity or Manicheanism, but of the original Arabian religion. This term *hanif* was then a kind of derogatory word, but from a sobriquet with a negative connotation it became a

name of honour. That passed then also in the re-evaluation of 'authentic' Arab religion, which found its highpoint in Islam. Here in sura 19 Abraham was not yet designated by this term. This could thus signify that the revolution in the figure of Abraham was not yet complete at the time when this sura 19 was formed. The figure of Ishmael appears only in verse 54 and in such a manner that there appears to be no single connection with Abraham. This connection comes only in the late Meccan period and would reach its full development only in the Medina period.

46-48: *This one said...He said...I will turn myself away...* . In the Qur'an (and in all Arabic texts) it is a sign of good usage if the exchange of persons is not rendered emphatically. That means that there are sometimes difficulties for hearers or readers. In verse 46 *This one said* must be read as a text about Abraham's father (Azar according to 6:74, not Terah as in the Jewish tradition and also often among later Muslims). *He said* in verse 47 is then about Abraham, while *I will turn myself away* in verse 48 is connected in the first person with Abraham, just as in the beginning of the preceding verse.

77: That one says: '*For me possessions and descendents!*' As with many such verses, it is difficult to judge whether this refers to a specific person, probably an opponent of Muhammad, or to a more general category of persons. This is rather like what appears in 90:6, where we are taken aback by a particular person who boasted that he has given away all of his wealth. There we see an irresponsible rich man, who would give nothing to the poor and thought that 'he had the power to dispose of his own wealth'. This verse, 19:77, applies aptly to anyone who trusts that he is not dependent on God's benevolence.

78: *Agreement*. The Arabic word *ahd* represents a contract or solemn agreement, so can be translated also as pact or covenant.

88-96: *Is the argument against the Christians or against the worshippers of Arabian gods and goddesses?* Within the whole of this sura this passage would naturally and easily be taken as a

judgement against the Christians, who consider Jesus to be a child of God. But here we have a problem of interpretation similar to that which we find in sura 112. Are we required to read these as an indictment against Christian doctrine, or simply as a judgement against the Arabian veneration of goddesses as God's children?

Because of the rhyme scheme and the robust language in both passages, this section of sura 19 and that in sura 53:19-29, it seems that the internal-Arab polemic is obvious here:

- 53:19. Have you sometimes seen Al-Lāt?
20. Al-'Uzzā or the third goddess Manāt?
21. For you sons, for Him daughters?
22. That division is indeed far from fair.
23. These three carry a name devised for them by yourselves
and your fathers,
while no authorisation for this was given by God.
You merely follow conjectures and a delusion
although guidance has already been sent through your
Lord!
24. Shall man get all that he fancies?
25. while the future and present belong to God!
26. How many angels stand there not in readiness in heaven?
Their intercession furnishes indeed not a single benefit
except the one to whom God has given the leave and
permission!
27. Those who do not believe in the hereafter
name the angels with women's names.
28. Understanding, that is what is wanting among them.
They follow nothing but conjecture,
in nothing at all is conjecture able to undermine the truth.
29. Withstand therefore those who resist our message,
Those who elect earthly and transitory gain

Conclusion

This life of Jesus is somewhat shorter than that in sura 3, but certainly must be seen as a complete account, from the annunciation and birth to the discussion of his death. In the

exegesis of the Qur'an it was generally concluded that this passage 19:1-33 is the oldest section about John and Jesus. After the narrative section there follow two polemic passages, 34-40 and 88-98. The final section should be taken as opposing belief that the old-Arabian gods and goddesses could be regarded as children, possibly daughters, of God. However, in the context of this sura this argument must be taken also as a correction of Christian belief. With much respect and appreciation for the earlier figure of Jesus the Qur'an nevertheless has brought its own message here. That message became systematically worded in a book of revelation: in succession to the earlier prophets such as Zechariah, Jesus, Abraham, Moses and others a message was brought concerning the single divinity, the revealer, of whom further is emphasised his role as judge on the day of judgement.

A sign from God Sura 21:89-91

The title of sura 21 is *anbiya*, or ‘prophets’. This theme appears in the first section of the sura, when the possibility of God having a child is denied.

25. And we have sent no messenger before your time without Our having revealed to him that there is no god but I, therefore serve Me.
26. And they said: ‘The Merciful has taken a child for himself’.
May He be praised!
On the contrary: they are merely esteemed servants.

We must regard this passage not only as a judgement on Christians and their belief in Jesus as son of God. The wording is strongly similar to the rejection of the three goddesses Al-Lāt, Al-‘Uzzā and Manāt in 53:19-23. There (and also in 7:71) they were referred to as ‘nothing but names’. The episode of sura 53 is connected with the ‘Satanic Verses’ spoken by the devil to Muhammad, imitating the voice of Gabriel and suggesting that they were ‘cranes’ or even ‘esteemed servants’ but certainly not authentic children of God. All messengers have at all times reiterated the same revelation: There is no god but God alone.

Here in verse 25 it is not the term *nabi* or prophet that is employed but *rasul*, which means messenger. In later Islamic theology the understanding of *nabi* was utilized for a large group of individuals who had been sent to a people with a revelation concerning the way of God. From then on *rasul* or ‘messenger’ was used only for a smaller group of people who brought as well a (new) writing with prescriptions for daily life. Thus Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad are called *rasul* as well as *nabi*. Besides these people the Qur’an uses the term *rasul* also for Noah, Lot, Ishmael, and the Arab messengers Shu’ayb, Hud, and Salih. In general speech, however, in the vocabulary of the Qur’an as in later theology, the terms *nabi* and

rasul were often not differentiated. In the text of this sura (with the exception of the title) neither the word *nabi* nor its plural form *anbiya* themselves appear at all. This also points to the fact that the difference between the two terms should not be overstated.

The name 'prophets' for this sura is especially applicable to the second section (48-96) in which a whole procession of prophets march past. This begins in verse 48 with Moses and Aaron, followed by a long passage concerning Abraham and Lot (51-71), after which brief mentions are made concerning Isaac and Jacob (72-75), Noah (76-77), David and Solomon (78-82), Job (83-84), Ishmael, Idris, and Dhu al Kifl (identified as Joshua, Elijah, Ezekiel or Bashir a son of Job, 85-88). In 89-91 there follows a short reference to Zechariah, John and the birth of Jesus.

89. And on Zechariah when he called on your Lord:
'My Lord, do not let me remain alone,
although You are the best of the inheritors.'
90. Then We heard him and we gave him John;
We made his wife again fruitful.
They competed in good deeds
And called on Us in longing and reverence
And they submitted themselves humbly before Us.
91. And to her who guarded her chastity;
at that time We blew into her some of our spirit
and we made her together with her son to be a sign
for the people of the world.
92. This community of yours is a single community and
I am your Lord
So serve Me.
93. But they split up among themselves;
all will turn back to Us.

These are clearly duplicated verses, taking up again what has already been stated elsewhere in the Qur'an. Perhaps they are earlier verses (here God is usually named as the Merciful, as in the middle period of the Meccan prophecy) and to be seen as a short variant of later verses that are not further elaborated here.

There are also references to the son of Zechariah in 3:37-41 and 19:7-11. The explanation, 'to her who guarded her chastity; at that time We blew into her some of our spirit', which refers to Jesus' birth, is repeated in practically identical words in 66:12. Also in 19:16-21 we find the coming of the Spirit to Mary, but not so graphically described as, 'was blown into'. Sura 23:50, which speaks in other words about the appearance of Jesus, is followed by a literal parallel of 21:92-93, so that we might well conclude that this refers to all the sects and mutual disruptions among the Christians. The Jews are also reproached for many faults, but not on account of such great dissention.

The concluding verses of this sura, 21:95-112, begin with a somewhat obscure reference to the legend of the ominous powers Gog and Magog, associated with stories about monsters that might sit behind the great Chinese wall. These contemplations then shift to warnings about the end times: repent now and call on the Merciful. Succour is with Him.

A shelter on a hill ***Sura 23:50 and 91***

Sura 23, entitled 'the believers', begins with a commendation of the believers who acknowledge the basic requirements of sound religion:

It shall go well with the believers
Who are humble in their ritual prayers
Who shun empty talk
Who bring in the zakāt contribution
And who guard their private parts (23:1-5)

This opening, somewhat along the same line as Psalm 1, 'Happy the man who does not walk in the deliberations of the wicked...' is followed first by a creation psalm, in which is included a meditation on the creation of man. He is made of clay, became then a drop, then a clot of blood, then a lump of flesh and bones 'and then We covered the bones with flesh' (verse 14). Also the cattle appear in order, above all the camels and their camel milk: 'and from what is in their bellies, We give you to drink' (21).

Following verse 23 there is a passage concerning Noah. In verse 31 comes the mention of another generation, for whom a prophet came with a call: 'Serve God, you have no other god than Him' (32). As always in the stories of the prophets there is ample discussion of the opposition the prophets encountered. Verses 45-49 take up again a few elements from the story of Moses: his fruitless debates with the pharaoh. Verse 50 is a brief reference to the story of Jesus:

23:50. We have made the son of Mary and his mother to be a sign
and we gave them a shelter on a hill with a strong foundation and a spring of water.
51. You messengers! Eat of the good things and trade acceptably.
I know what you do.

52. This society of yours is a single society and I am your Lord; so fear Me.

53. But they mutually separate from one another to form sects; each party rejoices in what they have.

In sura 21 verse 93 we saw a reference to the disunity of the Christians. Here we must ask ourselves, does this reproach in verses 52-53 specifically concern the mutual divisions of the Christians, or is this more the frequently reiterated theme, that the religions in general are apt to divide against each other? Both interpretations are possible.

Verse 50 has usually been read in connection with 19:22-26. When Mary became pregnant with Jesus she went away from home to a remote place, we might suppose out of shame and embarrassment over her condition. In a miraculous manner she found food and water there. In the general commentaries people usually think of her going away from the town into the desert. The older commentaries suggest a part of Jerusalem, Damascus, or even Ain Shams (a part of Cairo where a monument commemorating the flight of Mary, Joseph and Jesus into Egypt is set up; according to Shihab 2000, vol. 9:198, based on the Egyptian medieval scholar al-Biqā'i). But other possibilities can be taken up: in a Javanese account of the 'Islamic Jesus' Mary withdrew into the primeval forest! (Steenbrink, 2003).

We find an interpretation of verse 50 that is certainly very different among the Ahmadiyah Muslims, the followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908). In writing and speaking Mirza Ghulam took part in the lively debates in British India, in which Muslims, well trained in faith, civilisation and the future of their land by traditional and modern British, engaged in debate with other Muslims, Hindus (particularly the Arya Samaj), Christian missionaries and the secularised. Mirza Ghulam saw himself as someone who had a special divine mandate for modern times, as the last incarnation of Vishnu and also as the returned Jesus who must also be the *mahdi* or the prophet of the end times for the Muslims. According to Mirza Ghulam Jesus could not be present with God in heaven after he was saved from the cross, because God is non-corporeal, free of

physical or material restrictions. How could a bodily Jesus abide with an incorporeal divinity? The solution was that *I let you die and I shall raise you up to Myself* (3:55) was translated as: *I shall cause you to die and lift you up in my presence*. This was understood in the sense that Jesus was dead or fainted for a short period, of three hours or of seven hours, after which he was raised up in a higher status and brought in safety to Kashmir. There Jesus enjoyed a further ninety years of life because, according to a *hadith*, he lived to be 120 years of age. One of the successors of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, and himself a very productive Pakistani author, wrote of this identification:

The greatest and best proof of his having come to Kashmir and of having lived and died there is the presence of his tomb in Khanyar Street, Srinagar, Kashmir. There is a tomb in this street which is called Rauzabal and is variously known as the tomb of Yūz Āsaf or Nabī Sāhib, of Shāhzāda Nabī and even of ‘Īsā Sāhib. According to well-established historical accounts this Yūz Āsaf came to Kashmir more than 1900 years ago and preached in parables and used many of the same parables as Jesus did. In certain books he is described as a Nabī (Prophet). Moreover, Yūz Āsaf is a biblical name meaning Yasū’, the gatherer, which is one of the descriptive names of Jesus as his mission was to gather the lost tribes of Israel into his Master’s fold as he himself says: ‘And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold, them also must I bring, and they shall hear my voice, and there shall be one fold and one shepherd’ (John 10:16). (Bashiruddin 2002:IV,1809)

Kashmir is a plateau with plentiful water. That fits well, but going further these explanations and what has been written about them has an elevated ‘Da Vinci Code’ quality, to speak irreverently. All sorts of small facts were over inflated and made very meaningful so that the text of 23:50 appeared to have a connection with the water-rich plateau of Kashmir. A further small example: there is a Christian re-telling of the legend of Buddha. It is the story of Barlaam and Josaphat, two kings who abandoned their office and became hermits. After their deaths their bodies were brought to India, where they were revered. This eastern Christian legend is also known to have been very

popular in the later western Middle Ages. The name Joasaph, the original name of Josaphat, would have been derived from Boddhisattva, the benevolent saints of Buddhism who choose to let pass the opportunity to enter into the eternal stage of blessedness and enlightenment until all the others have reached this point. For this and other interesting speculations consult <http://www.tombofjesus.com>. The website of the Society of Saints Balaam and Josaphat, <http://www.soc-ssbj.org> is something else again: a peculiar sect in which Balaam and Josaphat are identified with Buddha and the Chinese goddess Kwan Yin from which a new synthesis of Christianity and Buddhism is to come.

Many Muslims have great respect for the missionary activity of the Ahmadiyah because they take on debate with Christians. By means of a stream of publications they have protested against Christian views, showing the large amount of western and Christian literature they have read. On the other hand mainstream Muslims discard the Ahmadiyah adherents, because the latter assent to the fact that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad proclaimed himself a prophet, when there should be no prophet after Muhammad.

Ahmadiyah Muslims are engaging and tolerant believers, who debate gladly and often take time to exchange reflections on the Jesus verses in the Qur'an. Their starting point however is the rather speculative thinking of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, which they will not open up for further discussion, and the debate from that point seldom contributes anything of significance. The greatest drawback with the speculations of the Ahmadiyah believers, however, is that we should be obliged to accept that Jesus had lived for ninety years in Kashmir, and moreover that we do not know what he should have said and done there. Also the thought arises, if he was there, and alive, what is the significance of this? What meaning does it have for us that he was there if we have no further knowledge about it, what he did and said? Ultimately Mirza Ghulam Ahmad went about seeking a harmonisation between his understanding of God and the story of the Qur'an. We must see his explanation of Jesus' later experiences first of all as a function of an exalted and sublime conception of God. In the end all else is secondary.

A sincere pact Sura 33:7

Sura 33 is dated to the fifth year of Muhammad's residence in Medina. It was a year of love and conflict. It was the year in which Muhammad, according to the general Islamic tradition, fell in love with Zainab, the wife of his adopted son Zaid. They divorced and Muhammad was able to marry her. According to the standard interpretation verse 4 refers to that: 'God has not made for any man two hearts in his breast. Nor has he made wives for you as mothers when you divorce. And he has not made your adopted sons equal to your sons.' We must be cautious about interpretations related to specific situations, as the Qur'an is seldom concrete in the description of context. We have the interpretation out of the later analysis, which sometimes also specially attempts to make something meaningful out of a difficult verse.

In that year, 5AH, the Meccans carried out their greatest assault on the young Muslim community of Medina. They came with a great army, but Muhammad had requested the Medina citizen and early Muslim Salman, of Persian descent, to encircle the city with ramparts. The Muslims stood firm and the balance was finally turned. After this failed siege the Muslims could finally extend their influence to the other regions of Arabia and three years later the Meccans themselves conceded without struggle to the rapidly rising influence of Muhammad and his movement.

Between verses 1-6 (concerning the divorce from Zaid and marriage with Muhammad of Zainab) and 9-27 (a summons to unity and resolution in the face of the Meccan aggressors) stand two verses, in which reference is made to the earlier pact of God with the prophets, a strong accord with the believers in which they may put their trust, at that time and now. Precisely those who do not hold fast to it shall be struck:

7. We entered into an accord with the prophets and also with you, and with Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, the son of Mary, for We entered into a firm accord with them

8. so that He shall question the sincere concerning their sincerity. And for the unbelievers He has prepared an agonizing punishment.

We find a curious leap for the hearer or reader of the Qur'an between verses 7 and 8: where the 'We' form for God is suddenly changed to the 'He' form. We find the same sudden change demonstrated previously in sura 87:6-7: 'We shall cause you to declare and you shall not forget it, except as God wills – He knows what is revealed and what remains hidden'. Should we see the second section here as a kind of gloss, an amplification, from Muhammad himself or from a later compiler? Or is this quick change from 'We' to 'He' simply a characteristic style of the actual and authentic Qur'an?

The key word here is of course the accord, pact or covenant (*mithāq*). A detailed discussion of this is taken up in 5:7-16, in the middle of a long series of texts in which the attitude of the young Muslim community toward Jews and Christians was laid down. Firstly in sura 5 there appears the pact of God with the believers, that is to say the young Muslim community. They must be steadfast and as counterpart there is then the promise, 'that there is for them pardon and a great reward' (5:9). For the Jews also there was a pact or alliance but they had broken it, and because of this, 'We have cursed them and have hardened their hearts. They distort the words taking them out of their proper context and they forget a part of that which was enjoined upon them. And you shall still always find treachery among them, apart from a few among them' (5:13). Thirdly there is the pact with the Christians. Christians come out somewhat better off than the Jews: 'they forgot a portion of that which was enjoined upon them. Because of this We have placed enmity between one and another of them. God will demonstrate to them what it is that they have done' (5:14). Here also there is the strangely abrupt transition from We to He, that occurs so often that we may accept this way of speaking as a norm for the Qur'an. As to the subject of the pact, in the history of salvation the Muslims have embraced an idea that is similar to what Christians have coined in regard to the Jews as a kind of substitution theology. In sura 5 and also in the interpretation of this sura 33 the Jews and Christians have almost wholly been

displaced by a newer community, that of the Muslims. However this verdict is not total: the Jews forgot a portion of what was enjoined upon them and they are thus somewhat astray from the truth, although there are still a number of good individuals among them. Concerning the Christians it is their internal divisiveness, also attributed to the fact that they have abandoned a portion of the truth. But something of the truth still remains with the Christians. Later Qur'anic references to a covenant theology are to be found in 3:81 and 3:187. Another comparable term is *ahd*, also translated as pact/covenant, in 2:40, which occurs in a summons to the Israelites to, 'honour the covenant with Me, then I shall honour the covenant with you'. Further examples are found in 3:87, 48:10 and 16:91. In later Islamic theology the term 'pact' had no significant meaning. In social life and in political provisions (such as in the special taxes for Jews and Christians and the marriage legislation that in many cases prohibit mixed marriages) Muslim law would draw a sharp distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, while in theology many theologians gave a broader meaning to the word 'believers' than simply those who belong to the strict circle of the Muslims.

One in religion Sura 42:13

The title of sura 42 is *as-shūrā*, mutual deliberation or consultation. The word appears in a summing up of the core commandments for the believers: trust in your Lord, avoid major sins, be forgiving, carry out the ritual prayers, consult with each other, be charitable, offer resistance by opposition and eventually repay evil, although it is better to be forgiving. That then is the advisory part of a text that we might see as a poetic sermon, of which the first section is above all else an emphasis on the revelation given to Muhammad in the form of a book, explicitly named an 'Arabic Qur'an', an Arabic recitation or reading. (42:7) In this first section, as is usual in the Qur'an, there is a reference to the earlier prophets, of which the present revelation in the Qur'an is a continuation and intensification.

42:13. He has prescribed to you the religion that He enjoined
upon Noah and which We have revealed to you
and which We enjoined upon Abraham, Moses and Jesus.
Hold the religion firmly and do not form divisions in it.
Burdened are those who serve many gods
by that to which they were called.
To that end God chooses whom He will
And points out a good way back to the guilty.

The word that is used here for religion (*dīn*) appears elsewhere in the Qur'an with the same meaning. However the same word in many other places has a very different meaning, namely the day of judgement, at the end of time. The 'early' or Meccan Muhammad very often elaborates the eschatological theme of the day of judgment. In the Medina period the organisation of the new religion is more central. Still, this is a Meccan sura and the word *dīn* here certainly has the meaning of a distinct religion.

Apart from that we must not set these periods too sharply over against each other: the theme of the last judgement appears in this sura. 42:47 warns humankind:

Hearken to your Lord because a day is coming from God on which there will be no more turning back.
For you there is no place of refuge on that day,
nor any possibility of denial.

The word for ‘prescribed’ (*wassā*) in 42:13 also has the sense of a testament, inheritance and so also something of a ‘pact’ between God and humankind, with explicit provisions about what the terms are on either side. The warning to hold firm (literally ‘maintain a strong position, be strong’) in the religion and not to split or to divide appears at first sight to be a the contradiction of the rather resigned declaration in 42:8:

And if God had willed He could have made them a single community. But He allows whom He will to enter into His mercifulness.

This sober assertion that there are now several groups of people, who are also concerned with religion, occurs elsewhere also in the Qur’an. In 16:93 it is more harshly stated: ‘He brings into error whom He will and He brings into a good path whom He will and you shall be called to give an account for all that you have done.’ In 5:48 it is stated somewhat laconically:

If God had willed, He should have made you a community, but He has put you to the test in respect to what you were given. So strive then in good deeds.

Further passages similar to these may be found in 6:35, 11:118, 13:31, 10:99. It is thus a theme that appears more than once, clearly a problem that Muhammad also confronted: why is the one God and his explicit message not everywhere understood in the same way?

After the five ‘mysterious’ opening letters H M A S K verse 42:3 commences with an affirmation, an introduction to the core issues of the revelation to Muhammad: ‘Thus God revealed, the mighty, the wise, to you and to those who were before your time.’ The ‘you’ as far as we can judge is always to be read in the Qur’an as Muhammad, for the whole Qur’an is always God’s word to Muhammad. At the same time it stands in this text as a reference to the earlier prophets. Of these prophets only four appear named here. Adam does not yet feature, as is

often the case. Actually speaking it was the later Islamic theology that gave him a place in the list of prophets. The four who appear here (and among them also Jesus) play a most important role. For the longer list of named prophets see the notes on sura 6, where a list of eighteen prophets is discussed.

A servant as example Sura 43:57-65.

Sura 43 has a number of themes that it shares with sura 42. It begins in the first verse with two identical 'mysterious letters', H M. After that there follows, just as in 42:7, a reference to the Arabic Qur'an. Regularly we find a reference here to the prophets who were before Muhammad and also to the fact that they were all without a sympathetic audience as he was. Thus a principal theme of the middle and late Meccan period was that Muhammad always encountered resistance. Also the regular use of the divine name, the Merciful (*Rahman*) in 17, 19, 20, 33, 36, 45, 81 indicates a not too late Meccan origin. In an early section (verses 5-25) a polemic is advanced against the Meccans concerning the creator, who has sent the revelations to Muhammad. Following a section on Abraham (26-45) and one concerning Moses (46-56) there follows a portion about Jesus (57-65). As always the principal theme is that the prophets do not produce faith but are themselves laughed at. After the section on Jesus there is a further sharp fulminatory sermon with promises of hellfire, in which Malik the angelic manager of Hell plays a role.

An important theme in the polemic with the Meccans was the status of the feminine divinities worshipped in pre-Islamic times. Were they daughters of God? 42:16 repeats the argument that also appears in 53:19-22: if God had wanted to have children, would he not of a certainty have taken sons and not daughters: 'Or has He taken out of what He created daughters for Himself and chosen sons for you?' At the end of sura 43 this theme comes up again, in a declaration that would be nearly identical with a contribution to the polemic by Muhammad himself, had not the small word 'say' appeared:

43:81. Say: If the Merciful had a child
then I would be the first of the worshippers.
82. Praise to the Lord of the heavens and the earth,
The Lord of the throne,
Exalted is He above what they ascribe to Him.

Most parts of this polemical sura concern themselves with the lack of miracles associated with Muhammad's appearance. Because of that lack many do not believe.

There is in verses 26-28 a reference to Abraham, who also had to deal with a troublesome people. In 46-56 there is a reference to Moses, also as a preacher who found scant hearing from the pharaoh. In 57-65 there follows immediately a passage about Jesus:

43:57. And when the son of Mary was held up as an example
your people began immediately to raise a clamour about it.
58. And they say: 'Are our gods better, or is he?'
But they held him only to dispute
Yea for certain, they are a contentious people.
59. He is merely a servant on whom We have bestowed our favour and whom We have made an example for the people of Israel.
60. And if We had so willed we could have created angels from the midst of you to succeed each other on the earth.
61. And he is a distinguishing sign for the hour.
Have no doubt about it and follow me;
That is a true way.
62. And do not let the satan hinder you;
For you he is an avowed enemy.
63. When Jesus came with the clear signs he said:
'I have come to you with wisdom
And I shall make clear to you some of the things over which you disagree.'
64. God is my Lord and your Lord
Therefore serve Him, that is a true way.'
65. But the sects are in mutual disagreement.
Woe then to them who do what is wrong
On account of the punishment on the day of pain.

The English (or perhaps more properly Scottish) authority on Islam and translator of the Qur'an, Richard Bell, saw this sura as primarily a revelation from the Medina period, as he generally supposed a few incorporated passages (8-12 and 66-78) to be. Concerning the Jesus verses he saw 60-62 as the original core. On that basis 57-59 should be regarded as later material incorporated by way of explanation for Muhammad's continuing

use of the example of Jesus after he had denounced the Christian teaching. (Bell, 1937-9, II:490).

On the other hand Angelika Neuwirth demonstrates the literary unity of this text; meditations, or actually short strophes, of more or less similar length, with a consistent rhyme scheme, ending in -īn, -īm, -ūn or -ūm.

The most important themes of the passage to be discussed are: Firstly, example (57-79): is this a parable of Jesus or is Jesus himself the example? Secondly, Jesus as the sign showing the meaning of the hour (verse 61). Must Jesus return before the end of the times shall come? Thirdly, Jesus came with proof and wisdom (verse 63). Must we take this to mean special miracles and a special writing?

43:57. *And when the son of Mary was held up as an example...*

58... *But they held him only to dispute*

59. *He is merely a servant on whom We have bestowed our favour and whom We have made an example for the people of Israel.*

Muhammad had already during the Meccan period held up Christianity, or more precisely the person of Jesus, as an example, probably of the possibility of a revelation from God by way of a similar figure, namely Muhammad himself. In this polemic it is then clearly stated in hostility, was he (or 'his God') better than our gods? By way of introduction to these fragmentarily rendered discussions Frants Buhl concluded that the break with Christianity had already occurred in the Meccan period, while that with the Jews developed some time into the Medina period. (Buhl 1924b) The critique is heard most clearly in the little word 'merely' in 43:59 'He is merely a servant...'. In 19:30 Jesus says of himself, 'I am God's servant'. There it stands clearly as a positive statement, an appraisal, with which Jesus speaking as a baby in the cradle defended his mother, that he is no illegitimate child born outside marriage, but a genuine servant of God to whom a book was given, and who is made a prophet. This stands in sura 19 at the beginning of a long litany of blessing for Jesus. Here in sura 43 the word 'merely' was added, whereby the title of honoured servant appears to have a limitation. However the remainder of the verse is clearly in praise of Jesus. There remains therefore the question that we

must face here with regard to this restrictive addition. Does it function here as a critique of the statements of Christians who see a son of God in Jesus? The problem with the interpretation of the word ‘example’ in the three verses 57-58-59 is that in verse 58 the opponents cite Jesus as an example, while it is used by God himself in verses 57 and 59. However that may be, verse 58 makes clear that the example of Jesus did not achieve its objective; because he was not an Arab? Or too far in the past? Or was it because he was not (more) spectacular? What would have been the case if angels had appeared from the sky? Apart from that, so many positive matters about Jesus are observed in these verses that we are not yet able to conclude on the basis of the little word ‘merely’ (a servant) that this is a debate against Christianity. It represents rather in this passage a debate between Muhammad and the people of Mecca, in which Jesus was cited as a proxy for Muhammad. We might then reconstruct as the *Sitz im Leben*, the historical context of these verses, that the Meccans had said, ‘Why should our gods be rejected, while you can make use of Jesus as an example?’ In response Muhammad might have said (indicating that he had received a revelation) that he had not brought Jesus forward as a God, or a rival of God, or God’s child, but ‘merely’ as a servant, ‘on whom We have bestowed favour’.

The expression *duriba mathalan*, ‘held up as an example’, appears frequently, not only with reference to Jesus but also to other persons. In 66:10 the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot stand before the unbelievers as examples of good individuals. In this sura, 43:17, it is literally stated, ‘if someone received good news, that the Merciful has formed His countenance as an example then his face clouds over’. In the context of the debates over this text this might be understood as follows. Acquiring a daughter is attributed to God by the unbelievers or by those who believe in more than one god. Men who receive the ‘fine news’ of a child-just-like-God-also-received become weighed down because they will thus receive a daughter, when they would prefer sons rather than daughters, as is suggested in 43:16: ‘Has He taken daughters out of what He created and chosen sons for you?’ In 43:56 the story of the army of pharaoh that drowned in the Red Sea ends with the

conclusion: 'So We made them harbingers and an example to those who would come later'. The reference to Jesus as example in 43:57 should thus be seen as a kind of literary process or connecting phrase, seeing that the passage about Jesus begins with the last word from the passage about Moses and the word 'example' is repeated.

In the Qur'an the word 'example' (*mathalan*) is somewhat similar to the word parable, although there is nowhere direct reference to the parables of Jesus, neither in terms of content nor in the pattern of a story. In the Qur'an we read of (the announcement of) Jesus' birth, the miracles, reference to the alleviation of the law and events around the crucifixion. One of the few examples in which perhaps we can hear an echo of an evangelical word from the parables is 48:29, where it was said of the believers that, 'their distinguishing marks are on their faces, a consequence of their reverential prostration. In this way they were characterised in the Torah and in the Gospel, as seed whose twigs sprout and later grow stronger.' The sign on the forehead that one can see shown by rather pious Muslims signifies that in ritual prostration they come in contact with a small stone that forms a callous that is clearly visible in the centre of their forehead. Anwar Sadat, the president of Egypt murdered in 1981, was an example of this. The seed whose twigs sprout is perhaps a recollection of Matthew 13:8, the parable of the sower, in which the good seed fell into good earth and shot up a hundred fold.

Another gospel parable of which one can see a parallel in the Qur'an is Luke 12:16-21 about the rich farmer who had a great harvest, demolished his barns in order to enlarge them, and then said to himself, 'Rest up now, eat, drink and be merry'. But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be claimed, and for whom then shall all the goods be that you have laid up'. Alongside this stands Qur'an 18:32-37:

And give them a parable: Two men, for one of the pair We made two gardens with grapevines and We ringed them around with palms and between the two We placed agricultural plantings. Both gardens gave their fruitful productivity and failed in this in no respect. And We let a river flow through both. This man had produce indeed! So he said to his companion with whom he was talking, 'I have more possessions than you and more at my disposal than other men.' And

he went into his garden, at a time when he wronged himself through injustice. He said, 'I do not think that any of this will perish, and I think also that the hour will never come. And if I am brought back to my Lord I shall find something better than what is here as my final destiny'. His companion who was talking with him said to him, 'Do you not have any faith then in Him who created you out of earth and then out of a drop and then has made you in the form of a man?'

Here one is not speaking of literal derivation, rather that both are parables that speak of the self-sufficient person who seeks his peace of mind, confidence and security in material possessions. (Buhl 1924a) Jesus is seen nowhere in the Qur'an as being himself the example; according to John 13:15 (following the foot-washing at the Last Supper): 'I have given you an example: you must do exactly what I have done for you.' Muhammad later, by way of the *hadith* – the traditions concerning his life – became the example especially in his deeds and in the things he omitted. The Muslims are ordered to follow the conduct of the prophet so far as possible.

The twentieth century Indonesian commentator on the Qur'an Haji Abdulmalik ibn Abdulkarim Amrullah, better known by his shortened name Hamka, has written in this connection a reflection on the parables of the gospel. He stated that the gospels themselves are notes written down by four disciples of Jesus after his death. Thus they are not original texts, but 'in the modern gospels we can still enjoy the wisdom of the prophet Jesus, peace be with him. The parables he has employed are very profound.' Beside that, Hamka indicated in this respect that Jesus identified for the Jews the weakest points in their lawgiving, notably in the story of the woman accused of adultery, about whom Jesus said, 'the one who is without sin may cast the first stone' (see John 8:1-11). (Hamka 1966-vol 25:92-3)

43:61. A distinguishing sign for the hour.

We have seen already in 4:159 a connection between Jesus and the end of the times. There it states that the people of the book shall believe in him before his death. In connection with the denial of Jesus' death on the cross an adequate solution would be that this refers to a 'second' coming of Jesus. The second coming should then occur just before the end of the times. In this coming Jesus, according to a generally propagated conviction, should reprove and vanquish the

false teachers and make the world ready for the general acceptance of Islam. Then he shall also conquer the 'antichrist', in this schema called *dajjāl*, and kill all swine and in this way remove all the unrighteousness of the world. In the *hadith* extensive stories appear and later fantasising scholars and preachers have made a lot of horrific accounts of it.

Modern commentaries are often rather reserved. They feel that we must adhere to the temperate word of the Qur'an. Hamka, as cited above, shows that Jesus came in some way into the world (by means of a virgin birth), clearly demonstrating God's omnipotence and greatness. In this Jesus is also a good sign to affirm faith in the general resurrection of the dead.

The translation and the commentary of the Ahmadi see no reference to Jesus in the 'he' of this verse, rather just as in verse 58 they see a reference to the Qur'an. We must read this in quite another way: there is knowledge of the (last) hour to be found in the Qur'an. This deviates from the general line of commentaries. Classical commentaries like Baidawi and Jalalain point to an unambiguous reference to Jesus in this verse. There are nevertheless a few older commentaries that also support possible alternative readings, as were cited in the commentary of Leopold Weiss, alias Muhammad Asad. Also an Egyptian modernist such as al-Maraghi excludes Jesus wholly from verse 61: it is the Qur'an that gives us knowledge of the last moment of the world and its downfall.

43:63. Clear signs and wisdom

The clear signs became generally understood as the miracles that Jesus had performed. Wisdom according to most commentaries was understood simply as the insights that had been given to Jesus. Orientalists (particularly Horovits) have suggested that Book (*kitāb*), Wisdom (*hikmah*), Torah and Gospel eventually are the four books, from Abraham to Jesus. Book and Wisdom should then apply to the pre-Mosaic revelations. This explanation is based on other 'Jesus verses', namely 3:48 and 5:110 (and in connection with this also 4:54, 4:113, 2:129, and 3:81). It is tempting then to suppose that this sura 43 is an early revelation, still preceding a period in which Muhammad had heard that the Gospel (*injl*) might have been connected with Jesus. However attractive it might be, this uncertain data remains speculative.

Monastic life is no imitation of Jesus Sura 57:27

The 29 verses of sura 57 begin as a kind of psalm: praise of God as thanksgiving for the creation and a kingly management of the earth. Then follows a call to faith in the messenger, sealed with a promise of paradise, the garden with a river, shade, blessedness. On the other hand, naturally, the evildoers will deservedly go to hell. This message ends in a call to charity, as a consequence of the conviction 'that this world is merely play, a trifle, pomp and show.' Man is not unaware of all this, for in earlier times also he has heard of it. Verse 26 points to Noah and Abraham, who were sent as prophets. Among the people there is the one who is on the right path, but many of them do wrong.

27. Then We caused our messengers to follow in their footsteps and We caused Jesus the son of Mary to follow, and We gave him the gospel.
We put in the hearts of those who followed compassion and mercy, and monasticism they instituted themselves apart from what We had prescribed for them. But they did this striving after what pleases God. However they did not observe it in the way they should have observed it. Thus We gave their reward to those among them who believed. But many of them were evildoers.

The last two verses, 28-29, that still follow in this sura are an exhortation to follow the messenger of God.

There is a word of Muhammad in the second source of Muslim tradition, the tradition of the prophet or *hadith*, which states: there is no monasticism in Islam. Also in this text from the Qur'an criticism of this way of life is carried on, although in milder form: it can also bring about good, but it is not based on God's instruction and thus it is not based on a command of Jesus. On the other hand compassion and mercy became closely associated with monasticism and we may thus rightly accept that Muhammad had much sympathy for it. Monasticism was a part

of the Christianity of the deserts and an important expression of the faith. The Qur'an shows three times concerning wine that some things are ambiguous and that one may see a good and a bad aspect of something (2:219, 4:43, 5:90-91). There the bad side of drinking wine, however, is more predominant.

Concerning monks it is said further in 5:82 (positively: 'you will find the Christians the nearest in affection, because among them there are priests and monks and they are not arrogant.') and 9:31 and 34 (in very negative tone: 'They have taken their scripture scholars and monks to be lords apart from God, and also the Messiah, the son of Mary...the monks devour the people's possessions'). Concerning Jesus himself the text of the sura has little new to offer.

Corrector of the Torah and foreteller of Ahmad Sura 61:6 and 14

Sura 61 has as its title *As-Saff*, which means literally ‘rows, battle array, rank’. One can think of the austere, disciplined and serried ranks in which Muslims perform the ritual prayers. Even more we might properly think also, in terms of the introduction to verse 4, of ‘those who fight in serried ranks for the way of God as though they were a solid interconnected construction.’

The sura is of loose structure. Verses 1-4 are a call to the believers to be loyal in the practice of their faith and to join fighting when necessary. May we read here reference to the Jews of Medina, who confessed God’s oneness, but when it came to a real war, they did not fight alongside Muhammad to oppose the attacks of the Meccans? Verses 5 and 6 would then be references to Moses and Jesus in a polemic with the Jews. It was said of Moses that his people also were often unwilling to follow him. The same lot befell Jesus, who affirmed the Torah (of Moses) and at the same time announced also a prophet who would follow him:

6. Jesus, the son of Mary, said:
‘O people of Israel, I am the one sent to you from God
to confirm all that before my time was of the Torah
and to proclaim the good news of a messenger who will come
after me
whose name shall be the praised one (Ahmad).’
But when he came to them with clear signs they said:
This is blatant sorcery.

Verses 7-13 are also, once again, a polemic against people who are summoned to ‘the surrender’, and thus to ‘islam’, a word that perhaps is being used with the new meaning of a religious movement, distinct from Judaism and Christianity. Must we look for Muhammad’s opponents particularly among the Jews of Medina; or for all that among the doubters in the midst of the original Arabic inhabitants of Medina? Three times (61:2, 10 and 14) these opponents were referred to as, ‘you who believe’, a phrase employed for this latter group. Or has it become merged here with reference to the final opponents of

Muhammad in Mecca, considering that in verse 10 after all there was discussion of a better trade deal: 'You who believe, shall I direct you to a better deal, that will save you from a painful punishment?'

The sura concludes with a final verse in which Jesus and his followers occupy a central place.

14. You who believe! Become God's helpers.
As Jesus, the son of Mary, said to his disciples:
'Who are my helpers in the work of God?
The disciples said, 'We are God's helpers.'
Then a portion of the Israelites believed,
But another group remained unbelieving.
And We supported those who believed against their enemies
And they received the authority.

The two Jesus verses in this sura have become subject of extensive debate and commentary but naturally, above all else, attention has focused on the foretelling of Ahmad. The name Ahmad, like the name Muhammad which appears four times in the Qur'an, (3:44; 33:40; 47:2 and the title of that sura which carries his name; 48:29) is based on the three consonants h-m-d, meaning praise. Why is the name Ahmad only found here, and not Muhammad? The general explanation provided by Muslim authors is that Arabic generally looks to the three core consonants of a word. These are in the case of Ahmad and Muhammad h-m-d and there should be no real difference between the two wordings. Ahmad is thus a general variant of Muhammad. The most critical western orientalist explanation or proposal is that the name Ahmad here is an addition made by a later copyist.

In a very ingenious study William Montgomery Watt has developed a different theory. By way of a variety of historical publications he has built up a picture of how both names appeared. Already in the century before the coming of Islam the name Muhammad was reasonably popular and remained so strongly in the following centuries. The name Ahmad, however, did not occur before the time of Muhammad and hardly even during the first two centuries of Islam. Only after that did the name become popular. By this time the word Ahmad besides being a personal name could be translated with a more

significant general meaning. Then it signified the ‘praiseworthy, honourable, laudable, respectable’, in each case constructed with the consonants h-m-d, to praise or to honour. Watt himself preferred to opt for a relationship between Jesus and Muhammad similar to that between John the Baptist and Jesus, where the last word was then, ‘someone who is greater than I; I am not worthy to undo the strap of his sandal’ (John 1:27). The ‘historic’ John the Baptist probably never said this, for there remained a group of disciples who continued to regard him and not Jesus as the greater teacher. Watt thinks also of John 14:12, ‘The one who believes in me shall do the works that I do. Indeed he shall do greater than these...’ There is no mention at all of this name Ahmad in the oldest biography of Muhammad, written by Ibn Ishaq (who died in 767, 130 years after Muhammad), which already knew of the application of the terminology of paraclete or comforter mentioned in John 15:23-35 to the Arabian prophet Muhammad. (Watt 1953b and Guillaume 1955:103-4)

In the first instance we must understand the word ‘comforter’ in John 15:23-25 literally as a person or agency who will comfort the disciples after the death or disappearance of Jesus. In Greek the term is *parakletos*. With a slight transposition of vowels (it is quite customary and normal for Arabs not to write in the vowels) the word *parakletos* is changed to become *periklutos*, which means ‘very illustrious’. This word could as well see Muhammad replaced with Ahmad in the Arabic text, given that the two names embody the Arabic root h-m-d. According to Watt the Muslims in the first phase had concluded that the passage from John 15:23-25 concerning the comforter/*parakletos* could be understood as an affirmation of the mission of Muhammad. Then only later would they have made *ahmad*, that actually was simply an adjective, into an alternative personal name for Muhammad. Naturally though, it was not so easy for an Arab to come up with such an idea. It was more likely to occur to a Greek-speaking proselyte from Christendom who could be pointed to as a very probable source for this apologetic explanation.

The ‘clear signs’ are generally accepted to be the miracles of Jesus, which were mentioned in several places in the Qur’an (for example in 19:29 where Jesus speaks in the cradle,

or 3:49 where a whole series of miracles is discussed). In sura 5:110 the same phrase ‘clear signs’ and the accusation of ‘sorcery’ are mentioned with reference to Jesus.

In verse 6 the Torah stands over against the Good News (*mubashir*, not the technical term *injīl* which is the Arab term for Gospel). Jesus has on the one hand come to re-affirm the Torah, and on the other hand to bring the Gospel. We find this same combination in 5:46. Only in 3:50 is the meaning of the Gospel remarked upon, that is in an alleviation with respect to the Torah, regarding the gospel as being to ‘make part of what was forbidden to you to be permissible’.

In verse 14 the word Helpers (*ansār*) is the general term that was in vogue for the original (Arab) inhabitants of Medina who sincerely supported Muhammad. Perhaps the word for helpers, *ansār*, was used on account of its correspondence with the term that was used in the Qur’an for Christians, *Nasara*. The term for the apostles is *hawariyūn* (also used in 3:52 and 5:111-112). This is probably formed from the Ethiopic term for Jesus’ apostles (Jeffery 1938:116). Some scholars guess that the word *hawariyūn* has its source in the Arab word *hawar* or whiteness. It could be a member of the Essene Brotherhood who insisted on purity and always wore white garments as the outward mark of their convictions. (Muhammad Asad 1980:75)

Mary, who guarded her virtue Sura 66:12

Strictly speaking we do not hear Jesus verses in sura 66, for only Mary is discussed, and then only once at the end, in verse 12. The verse however is too interesting to be left out and will be discussed in some detail here. The greater portion of this sura discusses an affair that we should now consider to be part of the private life of the prophet. The Ahmadi translation by Maulana Muhammad Ali also set this as the heading for this sura: 'The domestic relations of the prophet'.

The text of the first five verses is as follows:

66:1. O prophet! Why have you declared forbidden what God has permitted in order to make your wives content? God is forgiving and merciful.

2. God has decreed for you how you might dissolve your oaths. God is your protector and He is the wise and knowing one.

3. When the prophet disclosed in confidence some occurrence to one of his wives and she then divulged it and God made it known to him, he then acknowledged a part of it and allowed a part to go unconfirmed. When he informed her of this she said, 'Who has told you of this?' He said, 'The one who knows, the well-informed has informed me of this'.

4. Would that you both turn in trust to God, because your hearts strayed off. But if you both assist each other against him, then God is his protector and Gabriel, and furthermore the righteous among the believers and the angels will also assist him.

5. If he divorced himself from you perhaps his Lord could give him other wives in your place who are better than you, wives who have submitted themselves to God (*muslimāt*), believers, contrite, who worship and fast, those who were previously married or those who are still virgins.

Here verses 6-8 give encouragement to the believers to exert themselves in opposing evil or to be contrite. Verse 9 is a direct spur to the prophet himself to oppose the unbelievers and the hypocrites. In verse 10 the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot are mentioned as evil examples (according to this tradition it was not only the wife of Lot but also Wahila, the wife of Noah, who as an unbeliever was struck by a natural calamity). In verse 11

the wife of the pharaoh (who supported Moses against her husband) is presented to the believers as a good example. Then follows verse 12 in praise of Mary.

66:10 God has set forth as an example for those who believe the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot.

They stood under the protection of two of our righteous servants, but they have betrayed them.

Thus they had before God no profit from them and it was said: 'Go both of you with the others into the fire.'

11. God has given as an example for those who believe the wife of Pharaoh when she said:

'My Lord, build a house in the garden near to You and save me from pharaoh and what he does

and save me from those who commit unrighteousness.'

12. And Mary, the daughter of Imrān who guarded her chastity

when we breathed a portion of Our Spirit in

and she believed the words of her Lord and His books;

She belongs to those who have submitted.

The core of verse 12 is related to the Jesus verses we find elsewhere. In 3:33 Mary was named as the daughter of Imrān, while in 21:91 the defence of her chastity was discussed in similar terms. We find the second line about the breath of the Spirit also in 21:91. This line is also found in three other places (15:29, 38:72 and 32:29) applied to people in general or to the first man in particular. Further, it is stated that Mary's son was linked with the Spirit in 5:110, 2:87, and 2:253. There are parallels for the third line in 3:39 and 45 and in 4:171. The fourth line also appears literally in the same words, applied to Mary, in 3:43.

From the structure of the sura it is very clear that the four wives of 10-12 are provided as major examples for the wives of the prophet who were mentioned in 1-5 as the cause of problems that are not further identified. What is the background of these problems?

In the important compilation by Bukhari of sayings by the prophet and his companions (*hadīth*) we find six texts concerning these first verses of sura 66. The first comes from Ibn Abbas, noted expounder of the Qur'an from the first generation of the companions of Muhammad: 'If someone says to his wife, "You are forbidden to me", then he must bring an offering as expiation for this oath. It is an excellent example for

you to follow the life of the prophet.’ (Following the text of 66:1, ‘O prophet! Why have you declared forbidden what God has permitted in order to make your wives content?’)

The second text was traced back to Aisha, the beloved wife of the elderly Muhammad. She recounted, ‘God’s prophet drank much honey in the house of Zainab, the daughter of Jahsh, and remained there for a time. Because of this Hafsa and I determined secretly that we should say to him when he came to one of us, “You smell as though you have eaten camphor, because you reek of camphor.” We both did that and he said, “No, I have eaten honey in the house of Zainab, daughter of Jahsh but I shall not accept it any more. I have taken an oath on this matter, but you may not tell that to anyone.”’

The third and longest text concerns the following verse, 66:2 (‘God has decreed for you how you might dissolve your oaths’) and is traced back to Ibn Abbas whom we have already encountered above. This tells how in the period following Muhammad’s death he went about for a long time with the idea that he must one day ask Umar, the father of Hafsa and the second in succession to Muhammad after Abu Bakr (the father of Aisha), the meaning of that verse, 66:2. But it did not come about, because Ibn Abbas found it too painful as he held Umar in great respect. Then the opportunity of the hajj pilgrimage arose, in which Ibn Abbas accompanied Umar who is also called here Ibn al-Khattāb or son of Khattāb..

On the return journey Umar had to see to his private needs in the vicinity of the arrack trees. Then according to the account of Ibn Abbas, ‘I watched until he was finished and went to help him up. “O leader of the faithful, who were the two women who plotted against the prophet?” Umar said, “They were Hafsa and Aisha”. Then I said, ‘By God, I have wanted to ask you that all year long but I could not do it because I have such respect for you.” At this Umar said, “Do not refrain from asking me something. If you ever think that I am able to pass on information to you, ask me about it and I will tell you. ‘In God’s name’, in the pre-Islamic times of ignorance we paid no attention to women, until God revealed to us prescriptions concerning them. When once I was reflecting on a particular subject my wife said, “I advice you to do such-and such.” I challenged her, “What in heaven’s name have you to do with this matter? Why do you stick your nose into things and try to interfere in them?” She responded, “Ha, son of Khattāb, how strange you are. You don’t want to be argued with while your daughter Hafsa is

known to be squabbling with the prophet of God. So much even, that once he remained angry with her for a whole day!" Umar recounted how he himself had immediately put on his outer garment and gone to Hafsa and had asked her, "Daughter, do you indeed quarrel with God's prophet, so that he remained angry for a whole day?" Hafsa said, "In God's name, we did quarrel once with him." Umar said, "Know that I have warned you of God's punishment and the wrath of God's messenger. Daughter, do not let yourself be led astray by that child (Aisha) who is so proud of her beautiful outward appearance that causes the prophet to be so keen on her." Umar said, "When I went to the house of Um Salama, my relative, and spoke to her she said, 'Son of Khattāb! Why must you meddle with such things! You mix yourself up in affairs between God's messenger and his wives.'" In God's name, I was so stunned by this statement that I was no longer angry. I said good day and went straight home." Around this time there was a friend from the circles of the helpers of Medina who brought items of news about the prophet in case of my absence, and I used to bring him the news when he was absent. At that time we were afraid of an attack by the tribe of Ghassan. We heard that they planned to draw us out and kill us. We were genuinely anxious. When my friend from Medina knocked on my door and said, "Open up!" I said, "Has the king of Ghassan come?" He said, "No. But it is even worse. God's messenger has separated himself from his wives." At this I said, "Let Aisha and Hafsa crawl in the dust!" I dressed myself and went to the house of the prophet, but he was in an upper chamber, which he reached by means of a ladder, and one of his black slaves sat below, by the ladder. I said to him, "Say to the prophet that Umar son of Khattāb is here." The prophet allowed me to come to him and I told him the story. When I came to the visit that I had made to Um Salama he began to smile. He lay on a small mat of woven palm leaves with nothing between himself and the mat. His head lay on a leather cushion, filled with palm leaves, while leaves of a saut tree were piled up flat by his feet. A pair of leather water pouches hung from the balcony above his head. I could recognise the pattern of the woven mat on his skin and began to cry. He asked why I must weep. I said, Messenger of God. Caesar and Chosrus, the rulers of Byzantium and the Persians, lead a luxurious life while you, God's messenger, have such a simple life as this." At this the prophet answered, "Are you not content also that they might enjoy this world and we the hereafter?" (Muhsin Khan 1987:VI,404-407)

Above we have quoted three traditions related to the beginning of sura 66. All three of the remaining texts go back to Ibn Abbas and Umar and repeat what has been said above, that the two wives Aisha and Hafsa were jealous. Was it because of the attention that the prophet gave to Zainab, who was considerably

older than these two, or even more because her beauty was praised? There were two Zainabs. The first was Zainab bint Khuzaymah, a divorced woman from Mecca, a member of Muhammad's clan, Quraish. She married the prophet in April 626 aged thirty years, but died a few months later. The second, Zainab bint Jahsh, who has already been discussed, was initially not married to Muhammad but to his nephew Zaid. She divorced from him and married Muhammad in May 627, aged thirty-eight. She was thus considerably older than Aisha (born in 614) the only virgin, or woman without experience of marriage, with whom the prophet married, in 623 when she was nine years of age. Aisha was the daughter of Muhammad's trusted companion Abu Bakr, who followed him as Caliph after his death in 632. Hafsa was the widow of a Muslim killed in the battle of Badr (March 624). She was the daughter of another early and trusted companion, Umar ibn al-Khattāb. She married the then 55-year-old Muhammad in 625, at the age of eighteen years. The marriages of the prophet were thirteen in total. At the time of his death in 632 there were nine wives and in addition a number of female slaves with whom he had a sexual relationship, among whom was Maryam a Coptic slave, a gift from the ruler of Egypt in 628, and the only one among them to give him a son, Ibrahim. We must not regard these marriages so much as a reservoir for sexual pleasures, but primarily as political alliances, both within Muhammad's own tribe and more and more with all the tribes of Arabia. Even so they also produced rather a few problems which were further discussed in this sura and in sura 33:28-34, although without recording specific names or occurrences. (More on the women in Watt 1956:393-9 and Ascha 1995)

There remain here still quite a few problems that are not really important for the understanding of the actual theme of the Jesus verses. What the Qur'an text is concerned with (according to most later explanations) is that in verse 3 there is the reference to a secret communication. The most widespread story is that Muhammad had told his wife Hafsa, daughter of Umar, of a revelation of Gabriel, to the effect that after his death first Abu Bakr and then Umar would become caliph. Hafsa had passed that on to Aisha, whereupon Muhammad was displeased and had taken an oath that for a whole month he would have no association with his wives. There are two problems with this.

Firstly many accounts tell that the Muslims were left leaderless by the death of Muhammad and entered into discussion to choose a successor. Then there is the peculiar turn in the third *hadith* of Bukhari, from a story about an affair of jealousy into an incitement to asceticism, in which Muhammad would be portrayed as a kind of alien in the world and a withdrawn recluse. That would tally with the earlier Muhammad who received his first revelations in caves in the Hira mountains, but does it fit also with the later leader of the people and political figure? Well, maybe! These verses are also problematic in that in the later Muslim tradition the sinlessness and infallibility of Muhammad has been extended to his wives. In the 1974 film *The Message*, sponsored by Muslim investors, Muhammad is not depicted, nor are his wives. Muslim commentators also do their very best to clear the wives of the prophet from all blame. Finally in verses 10 and 11 there is a reference to the post-biblical stories of the wives of Lot, Noah and the pharaoh. Just as in the case of Jesus' mother, in which the Qur'an is in harmony with the apocryphal Gospel or Proto-evangelium of James, we meet here a harmony with post-biblical developments in Judaism.

God is one Sura 112

Say, He is God, one.
God forever
Gives not birth, is not born
There is none like Him, not one.

This is one of the shortest suras or chapters of the Qur'an. The text is often represented in calligraphy and hung as adornment not only in mosques but also in many Muslim homes. In ritual prayer, and even more in devotional prayer outside, the text is repeated many times, sometimes tens of times in succession.

Of itself this short confessional prayer is not directly connected with the person of Jesus. In the commentaries, particularly the modern ones, however, a reference to Jesus often appears, particularly a rejection of the son-ship of Jesus.

Many commentaries observe here that the text is a general reference to all forms of polytheism: from the belief that the angels should be sons or daughters of God, to the belief ascribed to the Jews in the divine son-ship of Ezra (see notes on 9:30), and to the confession that Jesus should be son of God. Concerning the last, the well-known Indonesian comment of Hamka reads: 'As the Christians assert that God has a son and that the son Jesus is the Messiah, who following their conviction is eternally with God's self, without beginning or end, then is the son for all that like the father? Why should people name the one father, while the other must be named son?' Through the centuries Muslims could not show much sympathy for the internal-trinitarian economy of salvation, which may be rejected as too speculative by quite a few contemporary Christians as well.

By way of a conclusion: A Qur'anic picture of Jesus alongside that of Nicaea, the Unitarians and the Evangelicals?

The main intention of this book is the presentation in translation of the Qur'anic texts concerning Jesus, with a commentary that might make it possible to reconstruct the way in which the first Muslims could have understood them.

Occasionally we have entered as well into the many developments that the Islamic picture of Jesus experienced over the course of time, although that was not the main issue discussed in detail. The first Muslims heard these texts within the whole context of the revelation of Muhammad. Within this process, over a period of twenty-two years from the first appearance of Muhammad as a prophet, different emphases came into view. In this concluding chapter we will discuss these developments set out in a more systematic form. In addition we shall give here a broad outline and some discussion of the development of the picture of Jesus in later Islamic history. Finally in these concluding considerations we shall present some proposals for a modern understanding of Jesus by Muslims and Christians.

From a supportive to a corrected Jesus?

The sequence followed in this book is that of the present-day edition of the Qur'an. That is a practical sequence, from the longest sura (2) down to the very short suras such as 112 (the Qur'an ending with sura 114). Muslims and non-Muslim scholars also distinguish between the chapters arising in two periods, the Mecca period (610-622) and the Medina period (622-632). Also within these two major periods a more refined chronology can be reconstructed. As we follow the recognised sequence of the standard edition of the Egyptian royal commission of the 1920s we should read the chapters we have discussed in the following order:

Present sura number	Following the chronological order	Present sura number	Following the chronological order
(112)	(22 nd)	2	87 th
19	44 th	3	89 th
10	51 st	33	90 th
6	55 th	4	92 nd
42	62 nd	57	94 th
43	63 rd	66	107 th
18	69 th	61	109 th
21	73 rd	5	112 th
23	74 th	9	113 th

This resembles a puzzle for advanced players! Is it possible to draw conclusions from this riddle? The attentive reader can find some meaningful clarification from this list.

Firstly, Sura 112 (22 in the chronological construction) is extremely short with its four lines. This sura, however, is frequently considered to be aimed at the Christian doctrine of Jesus as the Son of God ('God does not give birth, and is not born') but there are good arguments opposed to that. In the earlier revelations of Muhammad there were often declarations against the belief that God had a child or children (with daughters' names). At the end of the comment on sura 19 we have given a synopsis of these passages. In that section we have defended the proposition that the first phase of Muhammad's preaching about the belief in 'children for God' is directed against traditional Arabian religion, which venerated three female deities as daughters of Allah. In a subsequent phase (but still in the Meccan period) it was applied to Jesus. Whatever particular and noble attributes Muhammad would ascribe to Jesus he is never the Son of God. We must locate this denial also within this particular Arabian development.

Secondly. In the first Meccan period we do not encounter any Jesus verses. Noah, Abraham and Moses are clearly mentioned, the latter two already appearing in sura 87 (8th in the chronological order). The three prophets are all mentioned in sura 53 (23rd) where a vehement protest against female deities as daughters of Allah is included. So Jesus is a relative 'late-comer' in the Qur'an. Only in sura 19 (44th, dated in the middle Meccan period) he receives attention for the first time, although at once in a full and long section. Here we find a hymn that as well as stories of Zecharia and John the Baptist tells the history of Jesus from birth to death. There is here still no polemic against the crucifixion but in line with the earlier suras (such as 112 and 53) the possibility of a child for God is explicitly rejected. We must read these references to Jesus, alongside other prophets, as a reinforcement of one of the principal themes of the Qur'an: the merciful, creative and judging only God keeps himself concretely engaged with humankind. Time after time he has sent messengers.

Thirdly. In the midst of the many prophets, who basically are all alike (see the discussion of 2:136), finally Abraham springs out as the messenger who embodies the beginning of the Islamic religion. In the Meccan period he is still one among the many prophets of former times, but in the Medina period he becomes the first Muslim, the founder of the Ka'ba and the forefather of the Arabs. We see an alteration in the picture of Jesus appearing also in the Medina period. Jesus was not only a supportive prophet in a long series of Muhammad's predecessors, he was also an important subject in the debates with the Jews and (Jewish) Christians in Muhammad's milieu. The claim of the Jews in suras 3 and 4 that they were able to kill Jesus was rejected with indignation. Then also the rejection of the possibility of a son for God is related specifically to the explicit rejection of a three-fold nature for God himself in suras 4 and 5.

Fourthly. This 'corrected Jesus' comes to the fore very explicitly in sura 61 (where Jesus announces a later prophet, clearly to be read as Muhammad) and in sura 9 where divine sonship with reference to Ezra and Jesus is denied.

Fifthly. In the history of the interpretation of the Jesus verses the question that arises most often for Christians concerns the extent of the differences and the resemblances there are with developments within Christendom. From John of Damascus to Hendrik Kraemer theologians in particular emphasise the differences, while a religious studies specialist like Geoffrey Parrinder has generally pointed to the similarities. Even so this is a limited and misleading form of enquiry. The question is nearly always formulated out of the self-interested central focus of the questioner's own position: *homo incurvatus in se ipso*, the twisted concern of western people for their own selves.

The first question in this discussion must be concerned with the function and position the changing picture of Jesus had in the history of the Islamic movement. In this context I will trace a parallel with the development of the picture of Abraham. From a Jewish prophet he became an Arab prophet and in this role he served as a strong foundation in the development of the separate Arabic Islamic religious identity. In the development of the picture of Jesus we can see something similar: from a still somewhat colourless early prophet, like Noah, Moses and Abraham, the figure of Jesus served in the polemic with the Jews to consolidate the Islamic standpoint ('you have not killed him', 'you make plans and God makes plans') and later also in the polemic with the Christians ('say not three...', 'you make scripture scholars and their monks lords in the place of God, and also of the Messiah, the son of Mary').

As was the case with the Manicheans, so also Islam developed throughout the life of the founder into a complete religion with scripture, rituals, a religious calendar and ethical norms. This happened strongly in imitation of, and more so in rivalry with, the great religious currents of Muhammad's environment, namely Judaism and Christianity. On the one hand the Qur'an presents a picture of Jesus that for Muhammad was the general Christian picture of Jesus. We find this specifically in sura 19:1-33. In later sections of the Qur'an we find amplifications and corrections. In the first period the overall function is the supporting of Muhammad's position as prophet, in the later period it was the clear identification of the Islamic movement over against the other religions.

In the introductory chapter we outlined in broad terms how the Byzantines and the Persians had settlements in the region of the Arabian peninsula. Their influence grew steadily more dominant. One consequence of this was the possibility that the whole of Arabia might become subjected to one of the great powers. That also would have had possible consequences for the religious developments within Arabia: the outcome of this process could have been a transition to Judaism or to Christianity, eventually even to Persian Mazdaism. There arose another, more vital, reaction, which is named 'nativism' in religious studies and which we can find again today in all kinds

of independent churches in Asia and Africa. What was initially strange was newly re-interpreted in a creative manner and came to function within a new context. So it was that the figures of Moses, Abraham and also Jesus were given a new significance. Muhammad was not the only religious and national renovator of his time. He had rivals such as Musaylima and Aswad who set up similar movements. Ultimately the religion of Muhammad was the most formative for the future of Arabia and the whole world because in terms of the number of followers it became the second world religion. (Crone 1987, 247-248). This new vital Arabic religious movement was the basis for a national-political Arabic élan that within a few decades had annihilated the whole Persian empire and a great part of Byzantium.

Sixthly. The 'unique' Islamic elements in the Qur'anic picture of Jesus fit wholly within the general delineation of this movement. God is not only creator and judge on the day of judgement. He is also the merciful one who leads people in their actual lives. He was the one who supported the orphaned Muhammad. He sent humankind his prophets for guidance. The beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews expresses this idea very well: 'In various manners and along different ways, God has spoken long ago to our ancestors. But now, in these last times, he has spoke to us through...' But how to complete it: his son, or Muhammad, or again some other? That is always the problem: is there a final one, or must we really take the term 'seal of the prophets' in the sense of one who affirms what was declared formerly, in line with those sent previously, without thinking in terms of a definitive or absolute end?

Seventhly. The basic attribute of Jesus is that he was the messenger and servant of God. These basic qualifications he shared with all the prophets. The specific terms that refer to Jesus can easily be recalled as a Christian tradition, but they are actually more like something added in the Qur'an, as a kind of ornament without any thorough elaboration. *Masih-Messias* is generally understood by Muslims as a kind of name, not further interpreted, just as today for many Christians the name Christ often functions without further explanation as a personal name, properly linked with the forename Jesus. Word of God and Spirit are also both echoes, not further elaborated, of a Christian theological tradition. And the virgin birth? We will return to that later.

A broad palette for the picture of Jesus in later Islam

Following the death of Muhammad in 632, Islam, as a world religion, experienced a great number of changes. The expansion into many cultures, from Morocco to Indonesia, from Afghanistan to the territory of the Nizam of Hyderabad in India, had made of Islam a multi-coloured religion, exactly as had occurred with Christianity. Beside that the differing phenomena from folk-religion to philosophy, mysticism and modern apologetic discourse, have provided a changing picture of Jesus. The main lines, which we will sketch below, serve initially as an illustration of the great variety in this picture and as an endeavour to chart this domain somewhat more.

Next to the Qur'an we have firstly the great body of traditions concerning the words and deeds of Muhammad, the *hadith*. This body of text is the representative of the strong trend in Islam to stress the obligations before all else. The *hadith* is the source for Muslim ethics and etiquette, liturgical and social rules, a doctrine of practical duties, the first account of the *shari'a*.

In these broad collections the narrative elements also are extant. The most prominent as to Jesus are the stories of Muhammad's ascension and the occurrences preceding the end times, which are elaborated here. In his ascension Muhammad came to the first heaven (of Adam), after which he entered the second where Jesus and John were ruling. Before the end times Jesus will return on earth and carry on a struggle against the *Dajjāl* ('anti-Christ'), the great unclean brute that will be destroyed by Jesus as the beginning of a long, happy time that will again be followed by a real final chaos. In these stories there also occurs occasionally a physical description of Jesus:

The prophet has said: 'One night I dreamed that I was by the Ka'ba and I saw a dark man, so fine of complexion as one seldom sees, with a splendid wavy head of hair which he had combed out and from which water dripped. Leaning on the shoulders of two men he made a circuit around the Ka'ba. I asked, "Who is this?" and the answer rang out: "The Messiah, the Son of Mary." Then a man appeared there with a thickset figure and curly hair, he was blind in his right eye, so that it looked like a swollen grape. I asked: "Who is this? And the answer was: "This is the Messiah who is the *Dajjāl* ('anti-Christ'). (Siddiqi 1980:1:108-9)

The dominant character of the *hadith* as a directive for correct behaviour finds expression in a debate about marriage with Christian women:

When Ibn Umar was asked concerning marriage with a Christian or Jewish woman he said: 'God has forbidden believers to marry heathen women and I know no greater heathenism than that a woman says that Jesus is her Lord, when he is a man and one of God's servants.' (Muhsin Khan 1987:7-156)

This is a remarkable text. The Qur'an, 2:221, did indeed forbid a Muslim man to marry a woman from among the polytheists, but the Qur'an 5:5 is precise and gives explicit consent for a Muslim to marry a chaste woman from among those who in earlier times were given a book, that is to say Jews and Christians. Abdullah ibn Umar, son of the second Caliph who was murdered in 644, is known generally as a hard-liner, who formulated a number of standpoints more sharply than the text from the Qur'an. Assent for a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman would thus, in this case, be rejected.

Commenté [dKS1]: In Islamic eschatology the sequence is as follows: 1° return of Jesus who fights against dajjal (the 'anti-Christ') and destroys this brute; 2° as period (some say 40, 100 or thousand years) of happiness; 3° the chaos preceding the Last Judgment.

We come up against a quite different area of interest in the tradition of the stories of the prophets, which had developed already in the first centuries of Islam. The *qisas* or stories of the prophets originated with the popular preachers who filled out the fragmentary stories in the Qur'an with what they heard from the Jewish and Christian heritage and perhaps with other material. In terms of content they sometimes disappoint somewhat in that they rather emphasise spectacular miracles and marginal details. In this respect they are in harmony with many of the apocryphal Jewish and Christian gospels. A particularly well-known collection of these stories is that of Abu Ishaq Ibn Ibrahim al-Tha'labi (d. 1035). On the one hand he is closer to the gospel story: at Jesus' birth Joseph appears as Mary's (future) husband, and also three kings appear briefly at the birth. But in addition he offers all sorts of speculative possibilities about things that are unknown, such as the length of Mary's pregnancy (from nine months to one hour), the number of times she menstruated (twice or even never). Here we find also a debate over the question of whether Judas or Simon of Cyrene was indeed crucified in the place of Jesus. By yet again different cultivators of this genre it was even suggested that Pilate or Jonah took this role. The style of these stories is anecdotal. The polemic with the Christians and Jews has wholly faded away and the emphasis lies on the glory of God, revealed in wondrous events. (Steenbrink 2003:143-145).

The mystical movement within Islam has developed a yet entirely different picture of Jesus. Here he has become the most important ascetic figure, the pious god-seeker, who has left the delights of the world behind him. In this Jesus is distinguished from the other prophets: Moses is the one who moves most intimately with God and himself speaks with him; Adam is the most full of remorse weeping for his sins; Joseph represents the greatest physical beauty in combination with a pure spirit; Luqman is the most universally wise. Jesus then is particularly the itinerant ascetic who practices what he teaches. Above all the rule of compassion and the unique human spirit were emphasised. Tarif Khalidi (2001) has gathered a number of utterances about Jesus from this mystical Islamic literature. Of a few we might anticipate that they (like texts from the Gospel of Thomas) could be authentic statements of Jesus. Several of them are indeed based on gospel texts but are rendered in a different style. An example is the saying: 'Jesus said: Blessed is the eye that sleeps without the intention to sin.' We must read this in connection with Matthew 18:9, 'If your eye leads you to sin, pluck it out and throw it out of your way' (also Matt. 6:22-23 and Luke 10:23).

In a more speculative-philosophical manner Ibn Arabi has started to speak of Jesus as the 'Seal of Universal Holiness' (*khatm al-walaya*), whereby Ibn Arabi claimed for himself moreover a 'seal of Muhammad' (Addas 1993:77-81). In a substantially modest and more generally acceptable manner the Turkish-Dutch Professor Bunyamin Duran recently compared the teaching concerning the Qur'an as word and direct expression of the divinity with Jesus as Word of God: 'He, in whom word and deed, teaching and life, being

and acting completely envelop each other, is bodily the word and will of God in human form.' (Duran 2005:72).

One last picture of Jesus that we will identify here is that of the polemic tradition. A number of the greatest scholars in the history of Islam have written well-known works in this field. The best known are certainly Ibn Hazm (Spain/Andalusia, d. 1064), Al-Ghazali (Iran-Baghdad, d. 1111) and Ibn Taimiyya (d. 1328). They, and many others before and after them, have written veritable combat documents against Christians, more commonly in connection with writers they did not know personally. In the case of Ibn Hazm and Ibn Taimiyya they wrote against opponents who were already dead. (Schumann 2002:81-144)

Also the other polemicists themselves usually did not have much confidence that their opponents would read their writings. In these circumstances internal debates within the Islamic world went under the mask of a polemic against the Christians. In the course of history it was seldom that protagonists were able or willing to read each other's documents in a fair and open way. When between 1981 and 1988 I had to teach western religious studies, including the development of Christianity, in a state Islamic academy in Indonesia there was on the Muslim students' booklist first of all a book by the Egyptian Muhammad Abu Zahra, which appeared in Arabic in 1950 and was later translated into Indonesian. Abu Zahra had not sought advice for a description of Christianity or other information from the modern Copts of Egypt, anymore than Indonesian Muslims would read the books written by their Christian fellow countrymen. In this book the Muslim polemic tradition of Ibn Hazm and Ibn Taimiyya is still restated: opposing the divinity of Jesus, opposing the Trinity. These remain the two principal themes.

In the last 120 years a singular change has come in this polemic. In particular Muslims from India (and present-day Pakistan) have accepted the Christian critique of these two doctrines with gratitude. Pakistani scholar Muhammad 'Ata ur-Rahim cited in 1977 a whole series of Christians: Michael Servetus, put to death in Geneva in 1553, followed by the Sozzini cousins, who a few decades later had to leave Italy on account of what would later be termed Sozinianism or Unitarianism, the denial of the doctrine of the Trinity in order to confirm God's unity, down to Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) who as a theologian considered that it was impossible to establish a substantial historical picture of Jesus. With the exception of the Ahmadiyah movement people refrained from discussing the virginity of Mary and happily pursued other issues. That the supernatural element appears so clearly in the Qur'an means that few doubts were held about this matter. Apart from all this we must also realise on the Christian side that in the twentieth century, at a time when the historical-critical study of the stories of Jesus made much progress, a religious movement such as Evangelicalism appeared. In this movement the academic studies of serious but critical biblical scholars are neglected, and an identification of Jesus with 'God and no other' has caused no disquiet.

Another clear trend present in the more modern polemic concerns the tendency to speak about 'Islam' in contrast to 'Christianity' or more

vaguely 'the West'. Although such a polemic arouses feelings of frustration and disappointment, the most important aim is not to convince the other but to strengthen the internal unity and dynamic of one's own community. The polemical literature has produced little new to report about the picture of Jesus.

This very incomplete picture of the Islamic developments in the picture of Jesus serves merely to encompass its internal variety. In respect to each of these varieties it helps always to hold in one's sight how each of these might have been interpreted within the whole Islamic movement. The expostulation and debate concerning Jesus is not to be isolated from the whole of Islamic religion and culture.

Profile of a new phase in the dialogue

Islam has understood itself from the outset to be in contact and confrontation with the Christian and Jewish world. The relationship is one of 1400 frequently very tempestuous years. Moreover there was always discussion on both sides indicating very mixed reactions. There is nothing approaching a homogenous and stable picture of Christendom in the Islamic community. We cannot anticipate that a homogeneous and commonly accepted picture of Jesus will emerge, held by most Muslims, any more than it might emerge from the broad community of the followers of Christianity. It would be unrealistic to expect the development of any other reality.

It is risky to expect that perspectives for a common viewpoint, as the conclusion to a conversation between Muslims and Christians, will come from this discussion about Jesus. For a problem that has already existed for 1400 years, it would be no realistic perspective to expect that a theoretical solution or a break-through should appear from this book. Nobody is going to sit around waiting for such a theoretical construction. Perhaps Christians and Muslims do not need to come to a wholly identical vision of Jesus, when within the loop of their own history they have had so many different perspectives on Jesus. In this final consideration we take as a starting point the conviction that the corrective speaking of the Qur'an concerning Jesus must be taken seriously and that reaction to it must be made in the light of the more recent developments of Christian theology itself. We begin therefore with the one title that the Qur'an repeatedly rejected, that is to say the title of Son of God. Then we discuss six positive titles: servant, prophet, word, spirit of/from God, Messiah, and Sign of God.

SON OF GOD. At the beginning of this chapter, but particularly in the commentary on suras 112, 19 and 3, we have already discussed how the rejection of the naming of Jesus as 'Son of God' must be understood in the earliest development of the religious language of the Qur'an. In the polemic within the many-coloured world of Arabic divinities the idea of a child for God was repeatedly rejected, whether a son or daughter. In that way the naming of Jesus as God's son was also made unacceptable. Historically it is no longer necessary to go into how far there is still a Jewish or Jewish-

Christian influence extant here. That is of itself not so important. The title has been brought into discredit and is not, even after much consideration, able to serve in the Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Apart from all that it must be clearly considered at this juncture that the problems with this terminology also have appeared within modern Christian theology. It is especially the idea of a pre-existent sonship, and hence of a son-of-God before all eternity, that has become strongly criticised. That idea came to be seen to be in conflict with the unique Biblical worldview, rather as an offshoot of the Hellenistic-Neo-Platonist emanation doctrine and as such foreign to dynamic Christian thought. Rather abruptly formulated: even if it would have been the case that there was 'in God' through all eternity a father, son and spirit, what importance would that have had for people? It would not in itself have made people happier or more unhappy. Edward Schillebeeckx formulated this in a more academic way in the debate over John Robinson's sensational book, *Honest to God*: biblical terminology has nothing to do with the essentialistic but only with the existential understanding of these terms. In his own book about Jesus he seeks to speak above all else of the '*Abba* experience' of Jesus and writes concerning the later speculation about persons in God: 'The gospels do not speak of 'persons' in God any more than do the first great Christological councils.' (Schillebeeckx 1979:661)

This is only one of the many points raised in Christian reflection concerning the formulation of Jesus as God's son. Must we understand this in line with ancient eastern theories of kingship, in which the ruler was awarded the designation of 'God's son' as a title of honour? Must we understand this in line with Greek mythology, which spoke so easily of sons of the gods? Is this to be understood in line with Hellenistic-Jewish doctrines of emanation, wherein it was thought that there must exist a being (Wisdom, *Logos*) between God and the creation.? Within a culture wherein none of these terms has any self-evident meaning, it is clear that an open debate has arisen around this discussion of Jesus as God's son. In this debate, in the modern era, it is certain also that the Muslim disavowal must be taken into account.

SERVANT. The word '*abd*' (similar to the Hebrew '*ebed*') is one of the basic terms employed in the Qur'an for the general relationship between humanity and God. We do not need to take this as a humiliating state of slavery. There were indeed slaves in the Mecca and Medina of Muhammad's day, but they were considered to be more or less members of the household, who might own possessions as well as having both duties and rights. The term might also be read more as a dedicated servant, without further elaboration. The ultimate, predominating description for the relationship of humankind with God became the term *muslim*, one who had surrendered himself or herself to God. The term *muslim* was especially ascribed to Abraham, and perhaps indirectly also to Jesus in 2:136. For Jesus the term servant was used repeatedly. As with the other specific titles given to Jesus, we can draw no precise meaning from the wording of the Qur'an. In the later commentaries the term was used also in a very polemic way: that Jesus is not god-like, but just like Muhammad (for whom the term was also frequently used) he is a

faithful servant of God. The specific understanding of the suffering servant, as used in the New Testament in reference to Isaiah 53, has perhaps really been played up by the frequent ascription of this title to Jesus. In the Muslim commentaries this is wholly absent.

PROPHET. The *nabi* or prophet is a central figure in the Qur'an. Frequently the term 'one sent' (*rasul*) is also used in the Qur'an to refer to the same figure. There is a succession of prophets, sent to groups in certain times (generations) or to geographically separated peoples. The concept that a new prophet is a confirmation of those sent earlier is not known only in Christian writings. It occurs also in Manicheism. Mani (d 277) used the term 'seal of the prophets' of himself in interpreting a similar series of revelations. Among the many eschatological images in general use at the time of Jesus there was also that of the prophet who would come toward the end-time, who may or may not be a return (or reincarnation?) of an earlier prophet. So we read in Mark 6:14-15 concerning Jesus: 'Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead and for that reason such powers are at work in him". But others said, "It is Elijah." Yet others said, "He is a prophet like one of the former prophets."' In this sense the prophet is closely related to the son of man and the messiah. Both figures, who precede the end of the times, come to play their role. Oscar Cullmann (1959:38-42) supposed that the title 'prophet' was one of the most important given to Jesus by the Jewish Christians, the group of followers of Jesus who continued to move in the circles of Judaism. Muslims, however, have not further developed the eschatological aspects of the term, unless we go so far as to claim that early Islam was a movement that especially nourished an expectation of an immanent end-time. That idea is at present practically abandoned by most scholars.

A special aspect in the understanding of prophet that has developed in Islam is the emphasis on an almost mechanical revelation that the prophet receives from God. Jalaluddin Rumi compared the prophet with a statue in a great town garden, in which a fountain plays. The statue does nothing to the water and merely conducts it on its way. So the prophet should be above all else passive and simply pass on God's revelation. For that reason there was a long debate in the philosophical tradition concerning the precedence of the philosopher (who through his own thought reached ultimate truth) and of the prophet (who attained ultimate truth through divine revelation). Here the traditional primacy of the prophet can become more difficult to maintain. For all that, it has been claimed in the modern discussion that the role of Muhammad as prophet was not so passive, and his personal predisposition and devotion became so accentuated that the modern Pakistani theologian Fazlur Rahman could say that the Qur'an is one hundred percent God's word, but at the same time one hundred percent Muhammad's word.

A special aspect of the Islamic debate is that concerning the 'last or final prophet'. The expression that Muhammad is the 'seal of the prophets' should not be read only as a confirmation, a seal, of the earlier prophets, but also as a point of closure. The Ahmadiyah movement, begun by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d.1908), sees its founder at times as a prophet, more than a

renewer, who set the Islamic movement again on a right path, and adapted to the times. This has been termed *Prophecy Continuous* (Yohannan Friedmann, 1989), in an important study of this development in which each religious movement has in its own generation a necessary renewing impulse. Or we could identify from our present perspective the need for the figure of a reformer, prophet, initiator of renewal, or suchlike in all new generations? In this Christianity and Islam are certainly in agreement.

WORD. Jesus was called *Kalima minhu*, a 'Word from Him' (God) in 3:45, in the annunciation of Gabriel to Mary. According to John of Damascus this could already be considered a point of agreement between the Qur'an and Christianity. We find this not only in chapter 100 of his *De Haeresibus* but also in a work attributed to him, the *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani*, where the opinion given on the question 'who is the Christ?' begins with the answer of the Muslim: 'In my Scripture Christ is named Spirit and Word of God'. (Sahas 1972:149) In most Islamic interpretations no reference to the Hellenistic *logos*-doctrine is favoured, but rather information is given about an actual and specific word from God, namely the brief 'be and it was', whereby Jesus was born, without a father, from the young virgin Mary alone. In the Islamic tradition the authentic word from God is nearly always the Qur'an as direct revelation from God. Only a few Muslims would speak of Jesus in this sense. Apart from that the rather strong metaphysically coloured doctrine of Jesus as Word of God has also come under fire in modern Christian theology. In a modern view, the world is wholly beyond seeking any intermediary figure in the sense of a *logos* between the single divinity and the creation emanating from him. Perhaps it is the concept of *intelligent design(er)* that might yet most aptly meet the concept of *logos* but that concept also is very controversial. As with all the other titles and pictures of Jesus there is a sharp need here too for new interpretations both on the Muslim as well on the Christian side.

SPIRIT FROM GOD. The standard Islamic interpretation of the expression *rūh minhu* 'Spirit from Him' (God, 4:171, compare the Hebrew *ruah*) was often conceived in a minimalist way. In most interpretations the Spirit was seen as the angel Gabriel who brought the message about the birth of Jesus to Mary. The same held true for the comprehensive name of *rūh al-quḍus* which in itself can be understood as 'holy Spirit'. Even in 2:87 and 2:253, where it is said, 'We have given Jesus the son of Mary clear signs and strengthened him with the holy spirit', it is thought to refer to Gabriel, and so it is not only the message about his birth to Mary that he brought but also the revelation of the gospel to Jesus that he mediated. When the Christian doctrine of the trinity is discussed (4:171; 5:73, and 116) it is thought to comprise God, Jesus and Mary, and the Spirit does not appear at all. Strictly speaking 'Spirit from God' is not, in the light of this discussion, an authentic title of Jesus, rather is the spirit external to Jesus, notwithstanding the terminology that is used in a few verses. We can see a similar shift in Christian usage, where there is still debate on the question of the Spirit proceeding 'from the Father and the Son' (Orthodox churches not accepting the phrase 'and from the

Son'), and in which the Spirit must rightly come to be seen as an attribute of the divinity, a name for God-in-action who also 'has overshadowed Mary/Jesus'.

MESSIAH. In the Qur'an Jesus was also named *al-Masīh*. Exegetes beginning from the standpoint that the Qur'an is an Arabic revelation have sought clarification from a study of Arabic words and have come to an explanation in terms of the verb *sāha*, that signifies to travel, because Jesus so often travelled about with his apostles. Also a derivation by way of *masaha* was mentioned, which means 'to smear' and which also can mean to rub with ointment. Most commentaries see this as a Hebrew loan word with the understanding of 'anointed', in the way in which a king would be anointed. It was then interpreted in terms of the descent of David, an anointed king. Nowhere was an eschatological understanding of this term offered. In most cases ordinary Muslims consider this title to be a kind of personal name without further clarification, just as many Christians do not know precisely what the word Christ means and see it as a kind of family name, or as Jesus' surname.

In the 1960s the Christian theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar declared that the doctrines about eschatology were 'for the time being not ready for use, because of reconstruction'. The time has not yet come for a new vision of the end of time. Eschatological sections of scripture have now been interpreted as social and political pamphlets, using the specific eschatological elements of vocabulary and style. But a new interpretation or expectation about the end of time is apparently no high priority for modern Christian theology. Also on the Muslim side there is not much fresh thinking about eschatological language and its interpretation.

SIGN OF GOD. In Sura 19:21 the angel presents God's statement about Jesus, 'that We [God] may appoint him a sign unto men and a mercy from us'. The word is also used in 21:91 and 23:50 'and We made Mary's son and his mother to be a sign'. With reference to the miracles performed by the child and later the adult Jesus, sura 3:49 quotes Jesus as a baby talking in the cradle about himself:

I shall heal those born blind and those who suffer from leprosy
And raise the dead to live, by God's permission.
And that I declare to you what you eat and what you store in your
houses.
In this is a sign for you if you believe.

The Arab word *ayat*, commonly translated as sign, plays a rather important role in Islamic doctrine. It is used frequently in the Qur'an in relation to the creation: Sura 16 reads like a Psalm glorifying God for his creation, with as a kind of repeated refrain, 'Surely in that are signs for a people who understand'. A second meaning of *ayat* as a sign is concentrated on miracles showing God's benevolence and special privilege to the prophets. Thirdly, *ayat* is also the word used for the verses of the Qur'an. Jesus is in Qur'anic

terminology given the title of sign/symbol in the first two meanings: as an expression of God's guidance but also as a powerful presence through his miracles.

In Colossians 1:15 Jesus is identified as *eikon*, sign or image of God: 'He is the image of the invisible God,' according to the *New International Version*. The *Good News Bible* renders this as: 'Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. In theological terminology Edward Schillebeeckx spoke about *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, title of a book published in 1958. More recently the American Roger Haight has elaborated the idea in a book with the title *Jesus, Symbol of God* (1999). An elaboration of this idea might be a fruitful endeavour for Muslims and Christians.

The Qur'an's pictures of Jesus certainly count as equivalents of those of Nicaea, of the Unitarians, the Evangelical Christians, but they serve only under condition that they must be used in a critical and creative way. Creeds and other formulations of any religion always need reinterpretation and reformulation. A study that especially gives attention to the Jewish-Christian roots of the terminology would certainly be interesting, but nevertheless is only useful at a certain level. Then we can determine more closely the common roots of the three religions and also with relation to the figure of Jesus. With regard to the question who is Jesus for modern people, be they Muslim, Christian, cynic or unbeliever, a further process of interpretation must be undertaken. This book has concentrated on only one important step in this process: the establishing, in so far as it is possible, of the understanding of the Jesus verses in the Qur'an for those who first heard this text.

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